TROUBLE
MAKER

SHOULD I STAY OR
for will
SHOULD I GO?

LEAVING
HAWKINS
COME AGAIN SOON

Don't call her Annie. by boogiewrites

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Summary:

Annette Horowitz is Joyce's younger sister. She hasn't been the perfect sibling or aunt but after she finds out Will is missing, she finds herself crashing back into Hawkins to do everything in her power to help, driven by a need to prove she isn't a bad person. She hasn't been around much in the past 20 or so years, but when she comes back home she finds old friends, old habits and old feelings she'd thought she'd finally escaped. Can she really change or is she just kidding herself?

1. Intro

The tires of your bike spray out gravel and you slam on your breaks in the driveway. This marked the end of your mad dash to get back to your sister after she'd told you your nephew was missing. You'd packed up and driven across the country that same day, this wasn't the first time you'd done this. It was the first time you'd had a real excuse to do it though. There was a car you didn't recognize in the driveway, you glare at it as you take off your helmet, unzipping your leather jacket and bounding towards the front door, your boots banging against the old wood porch. It always felt strange coming back here. You could hear loud voices fighting inside from the hole that was in the wall of the house, you had too many questions already. You try the doorknob and it's locked. Ruining your momentum you stand still and knock on the door.

"Get out of my house!!" you hear Joyce scream. You bang on the door, hard.

"Joy? You okay?" you beat the door continuously until it's opened.
You look into the eyes of Lonnie. There was no one you hated as much as Lonnie. You doubted there ever would be.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" you spit at him, shoving him hard out of the way and making your way to Joyce who was shaking in anger, her fists at her sides, breathing fast.

"I could ask you the same thing, Annie." he answers with venom.
Before you wrap your arms around Joyce, who was beginning to tear up in anger, you stomp back towards Lonnie, backing him against the front door your finger pressing into his chest.

"You don't get to fucking call me that you piece of shit." you shove him and head back to Joyce. "I heard what she said, why don't you get the hell out of here?" you say as you don't look his way, you wrap your arms around your sister as tightly as you could.

She was the older of the two of you, but she hadn't been the "big" sister since you were around 12-years-old. After puberty hit you like an 18 wheeler, you'd grown up and out much more than her tiny

frame had. You became almost comedically opposite in appearance. You were 5'8" to her 5'2". You'd elected to color your hair blonde. Too many curves came in too fast for your heart and brain to both simultaneously understand what to do with your new body and feelings fueled by raging hormones, so you found yourself in trouble much more often than she ever had. You'd learned later in life she was just better at not getting caught than you were. You were taller and sturdier, not naturally sweet or as polite as she was. The inherited genes you had both received were the big brown eyes of your mothers and that urge of protecting what was yours. At this moment you were particularly glad she was smaller than you, as you felt you could completely envelop her in your arms, trying to convey your emotions that you knew you were shit at expressing.

"I guess you haven't heard that he's dead." Lonnie says, still against the door. Joyce lets out an ugly sob, shaking her head. You squeeze her, pressing your face into the top of her head.

"I'm so sorry Joy." you whisper to her, while shooting daggers at Lonnie with your eyes.

"Use some god damn tact you neanderthal." your voice low, giving him a warning.

"You missed the funeral." your gut twisted at his words, you'd got here as fast as you could, you knew that.

"Be right back, Joy." you whisper in her ear as you let her go.
"Maybe she won't throw your ass out of this house but I will, Lonnie." you shout at him, making your way back to him. "I don't care why she wants you gone. You should've never been here in the first place. You don't give a shit about them, get out." You hiss at him, your stance wide and ready to attack.

"Look, you haven't been here, you don't know-" he throws his hands up to speak and you knock them down, hard.

"YOU haven't been here for YEARS!" you scream, your arms in the air. "You don't get to say that you scum. Even when you were here, they were better off without you. I've hated you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I've been right about you since the start...you're a

parasite." you see a duffle bag on the chair in the living room, assuming it's his. You pick it up and shove it into his arms. "I'm giving you one last chance, for her sake, to not beat the shit out of you and very literally throw you out of this house." you spew at him, pushing up on him, he wasn't that much bigger than you, but more importantly you weren't afraid of him.

"You're real cute, Annie, thinking you could-" You throw an uppercut under his ribs before he finishes his sentence, knocking the breath out of him.

"I'm not afraid of cowardly little boys who think they can hit women and children," you whisper, grabbing him by the hair. "Do I have to bash your skull in to make my point or are you gonna leave now?" you spit on him, shoving his head forcefully into the wall.

"Ann." you hear Joyce's soft voice pulling you away from maiming Lonnie.

"You need to leave." you say, slowly walking backward, away from him. You stand next to Joyce and he throws the bag over his shoulder.

"You deserve each other, your entire family has always been fuckin' crazy!" he shouts, retreating and opening the door. He mumbles under his breath as you move towards him again, he scurries out of the front door, you slam it shut behind him.

You rest your back against it and for the first time you look around the room you're in. There are holes in the walls, strings of lights, the alphabet is written on the wall, your expression must give away your confusion.

"I've got a lot to tell you, Ann." Joyce says, making her way towards you and placing her hand on your shoulder. "We should sit down." her face scrunches up in an unsure expression. You sit at the kitchen table, and she tells you everything.

You believe her because she's never lied to you before. You see and feel that she's being sincere and your heart breaks at everything she's had to endure without you here. Believing her was the absolute least

thing you could do for her to attempt to even begin to make up for all your shortcomings. You feel so guilty for always falling short and running away when they started getting used to having you around again. But you'd never been good at dealing with your feelings. Especially when it came to feeling like you were falling into a domesticated lifestyle you'd find pictured on the cover of a magazine marketed to middle-aged women. Although it wouldn't be too long until you would be considered middle-aged, you'd always found the thought of a white picket fence as an analogy for being trapped in a cage.

You tell her you believe her, because you always have and you always will. This seems like what she needed, as her eyes weep and her mouth trembles, you hold her, letting her sob and mumble incoherently as her grief and exhaustion hit her in waves. "Everyone else thinks I'm crazy." she squeaks out.

You wake up from a nap, having showered and throwing your things into Joyce's room beforehand. You hear a man's voice in the other room, you crack open the bedroom door and listen. Once the voice is no longer filtered, you recognize it.

"Today?" he asks. Your body slumps at the realization. You can only hear him, you assume he's talking to Joyce.

"Jim." you whisper quietly, your eyes closing and you let out a heavy sigh.

"A motorcycle, huh?" he scoffs. Your eyebrow raises at you decide you'll continue to eavesdrop for now.

"I get that, but isn't it a bit...much?" he lets out a low chuckle. You roll your eyes and frown. What a square. Having a bike made much more sense to you than having a car did. You shrug off the comment.

"Sure, she always has been dramatic but," there a long pause in his words. "Maybe you're right. When I see her I'll let you know." you can hear the smirk in his voice.

You were always envious of the way he spoke to Joyce when you were younger. This brought back memories of hearing him sweet talk her when they didn't think they were paying attention. His tone just made your skin prickle up, you shake your body and arms once you shut the door silently. You go and sit on the bed, looking at the floor. You knew he'd been helping Joyce, you knew he'd been the Chief for a few years now, but you hadn't expected to see him so soon after getting back. You also hadn't expected how involved he was in this mess that found itself falling around your family. But here you were again, the childish feeling of being a third wheel to the two of them. You push back the feeling, rolling your eyes at yourself. Being home again always stirred up strange feelings you thought you'd forgotten. You pull on a pair of leggings, grabbing one of Jonathon's zip-up sweatshirts that Joyce had given you to wear. You had on one of your tank tops, the only other clothing item of your own available to you since Joyce had insisted on washing all your clothes. You put her house shoes on, they surprisingly weren't that small on you. You stood and stretched, ran a brush through your hair. You're slipping on the hoodie as you round the doorway into the kitchen.

He hadn't gotten a good look at you since you were 16, and now at 35, it took some work to see the wild little sister of his ex-girlfriend he once knew. You swang your hips out as you rounded the corner, all big blonde hair and thighs. He felt embarrassed for immediately noticing your body. He cracks a smile despite his disappointment in himself, and despite the angst you wore on your face.

"Annette Horowitz," he states slowly as you grab one of the beers you assume Lonnie had left in the fridge and sit at the table across from the hulking figure. He wore a grin on his face, the smoke from his cowboy cigarettes framing his face. "Last time I saw you, you ran away from me in a grocery store." he smirks, taking another drag. Joyce does her funny little silent laugh, scrunching her nose and looking at you. You hadn't told her about running into him a few years ago when you were home for Thanksgiving.

"Two Thanksgivings ago." you say in a sidebar to Joyce. She nods and continues smoking. "I didn't know if you recognized me," you lie, meeting his gaze. "It had been 20 years since we'd seen each other." Jim slides his cigarettes over towards you, you take one with a nod.

"Of course I did." he blows smoke out of the side of his mouth.

"Hop's got something you're going to want to hear." Joyce cuts in, gathering up the papers thrown all over the table.

You'd noticed the papers but hadn't gotten past how Jim was looking at you to ask. So you sit like it's 20 something years ago and you're being babysat by the two of them, they're explaining their theories and you try to take it in. You'd heard plenty of questionable stories about the government over the years with the company you'd kept while traveling with hippies and activists to protest the Vietnam War. But being actually faced with it was something totally new. You'd knocked back at least 3 of Jim's cigarettes by the time they're finished with their story. You find yourself involved in the biggest cover-up in Hawkins history.

2. Advice & Arrests

With fighting a Demogorgon and being on the run from the government checked off your list of things to do before you die, you find yourself in the calm aftermath of the traumatic experience.

You found yourself with the kids the night Jim and Joyce left to go to the Upside Down for Will. You'd begged Joyce to go in her place. Jim had then yelled at both of you because he wanted neither of you to go.It didn't go unnoticed by any of the three of you…how strange it felt to be together again fighting. Jim was hit with a wave of nostalgia, the Horowitz girls both yelling, teaming up together against him. He never stood a chance. After Joyce pulled the "I'm his mother." card that you couldn't top, you'd reluctantly stayed behind

in the gym with the kids. You had ended up being useful at least, getting them running and stalling and misdirecting Brenner's men as they closed in on the school. You'd seen the Demogorgon emerge from the wall, as you vibrated with fear at the sight. You heard it's shrill noises that hurt your ears even after the fact. You'd been let go of by the uniformed men as they all grabbed their guns to kill it. You'd turned and ran down the hallway as fast as you could. You grabbed an automatic rifle off of one of the bodies near you as you'd hid behind a corner. Your shoes slipped in the blood on the linoleum as you tried to scurry to find the kids after you saw the oozing, heaving beast move to one of the bodies at the end of the hallway.

You don't talk about what happened to you to anyone. Not even your sister, even though you knew she wanted you to. You weren't about to add your problems onto hers. You were a bit too traumatized to immediately want to run away like you normally would at this point. You found yourself staying with Joyce more often than not. With the thought of not being able to spend time with your family again after the close call with Will, you start to realize your time may be better spent with them. You had built in people you felt you could trust, not many people had that. Not just your family, but a new group of people you'd called strangers what felt like just moments ago. It wasn't until faced with losing it all that you realized it's importance.

As the weeks pass, you start to feel like you can function again, leave the house, not have to get drunk to sleep, not jump at every sound you hear when you're alone. You start the painful process of getting yourself back into one piece, dragging yourself out of the depression.

You come back from a ride to clear your head. You see the cars in the driveway, the lights on and laughter from inside. You feel the pull again, the urge to run from the picturesque moment. You see Jim's Police Blazer in addition to Joyce and Jonathon's cars. He'd kept checking in with visits and phone calls. You'd began to find his attentiveness endearing. He'd brought back your nephew and he could've never checked on your family again. His obligation was fulfilled, but he'd kept on appearing when you'd start to forget about him again. You begrudgingly admit to yourself that he was a good man, a man you could trust. He wasn't the man of subtle villainous intentions you'd warped some of your memories into to cope with

your infantile heartbreak.

At the end of the evening, you'd been sneaking away to the backyard, leaning against the hidden side of the shed, trying to ignore the feelings in your gut. It'd been getting worse, and tonight you'd found yourself not wanting to turn around when you reached the county line. You take out another cigarette, trying to reason with yourself.

He sees you start to knock your pack of cigarettes against your palm as you slink out of the room, hiding your face with your hair. Your long legs carry you almost silently down the back steps. It's been over 15 minutes since you've left by the next time he looks at the clock. He excuses himself and goes to look for you. He doesn't see you when he looks out of the back door, standing with his hands on his hips, he slowly moves across the backyard, smelling your brand of cigarette smoke. He eventually sees it rising from behind the shed. He smirks to himself, getting out his own pack to join you. You still hid behind the shed to smoke, he was hit with nostalgia and he couldn't help but think about the last time he'd seen you before he left Hawkins.

"Hey." he startles you as you hear him coming around the side of the shed. Jim comes into view, already lighting a cigarette.

"Hey." you flatly reply. He wasn't exactly who you needed to see right now, not when you were feeling so raw. You'd managed to escape one on one conversation with him since he'd helped save Will. You knew you couldn't avoid it forever but you had given it a shot.

"Good to know you still sneak out here to smoke." he says with a grin, exhaling and looking into the woods. You let out a small noise of amusement, shrugging and realizing he was right.

"Good to know you can still find me when I want to be alone." you grin, but look at the ground and move your foot over overgrown grass.

"I can leave if you want. But you've been gone awhile, I had to check on you at least." he shrugs, showing you he wasn't here to bother you.

"You don't have to. I was only partially joking." this time you look at

him when you smirk. He'd noticed you leave.

"The past few weeks you've been staying out here for longer and longer." he exhales forcefully, "You wanna tell me why that is?" his eyebrows raise, his voice was inquisitive but not aggressive.

"Of course, I don't," you answer with a huff of a laugh at how difficult you wanted to be for no real reason. "But maybe I need to change that old habit." you mumble, taking in a drag to distract from the pounding in your chest.

"Joyce told me this is the longest you've stayed around before." he adds, motioning with his hands as he talked subtly.

"Yeah, I'd noticed that too." you half answer, keeping your eyes on the line of the forest.

"She's worried you're going to leave again." his posture mirrors yours, you don't look at each other, your eyes wander.

"She should be," you say quietly, you cross your arms and take a hard inhale. "Don't tell her I said that." you add quickly, looking up at him.

"I won't. Took me too long to earn your trust, why would I break that now?" he nudges you with his elbow, trying to ease your tension.

"Yeah I can't make anything easy." you groan, your head resting on the wall.

"For what it's worth, I think you should stay." his voice drops lower, his hands go to his pockets. "I'm not going to tell you what to do, but, I think you should stay through the holidays. Revisit how you feel after that." he throws his cigarette to the ground, crushing it with his foot. "Joyce would love it if you stayed." he turns his body to face yours, blocking out the light on the telephone pole creating an intimidating silhouette. "And because I've been there before, I know you want to try to make things up to them." his hand rests on your arm, you move your eyes to look at it. "That would be a great place to start." you move your head just slightly to look into his eyes. He pats your arm.

“That’s…” you let out a heavy sigh, letting your cigarette die in your fingers. “very good advice,” you say with an apathetic shrug. He smiles at you, patting you again as he moves to leave. “I don’t want to leave.” you say under your breath, a small cry for help. Luckily he hears it. He stands with his hands on his hips, head tilted and patient expression. He knew you didn’t share. He also has the natural tendency to be an asshole to people who try to love him, so he feels a deep empathy towards you. Maybe his lingering presence when you were younger hadn’t helped you in the way he thought it might. “I get this itch. This pull to leave when things get…” you move your hand to help you express your thoughts. “stable.” you nod in agreement with yourself and look up at him. He nods with an indifferent expression of understanding your point. “I get all cagey and feel trapped when I think I’m being, ” you use air quotations, “domesticated.” you roll your eyes at how immature it all felt to you suddenly. “I know it’s stupid but-”

“It’s not stupid at all.” he says, moving closer to you. His answer catches you off guard, your face softens as his becomes lit by the street lamp as he looms over you. The frown retreats to just your mouth, the ease with which he kept staring into your eyes made you feel small, and that wasn’t something you felt often.

“It makes me feel stupid, then.” your eyes go a little sad. “It’s hard for me to have faith that things will be okay if I stay. I always have this heavy feeling that I’m going to ruin everything for them by just being here, somehow.” His chest feels tight as he feels deep, painful empathy for your thoughts, taken off guard by your straightforward admission. Your words were raw but your body language was still reserved. He feels compelled to try to fix this for you but he sees you don’t need him to do that anymore. He decides to share a bit of himself with you instead, returning the vulnerability he wanted to encourage from you.

“Like you’re cursed or somethin’.” he says quietly, looking over your shoulder into the driveway, nodding, his tongue working over his teeth behind his lips.

“Yeah, exactly,” you say, your brow furrowing as your lips part slightly with surprise, forgetting to appear hardened for a moment.

“Trust me, I understand.” he looks back down at you, his lips tight.

“Maybe you do,” you respond, giving him a half smile. You let out one more sigh, trying to start shedding your old habits. “I’ll stay.” you whisper, sucking your bottom lip into your mouth. Your chest feels tight, you stand and let out a loud exhale before turning towards the back door. He’s surprised by the strong wave of relief he feels at your words.

“I think you’re making the right decision.” he responds with subtle enthusiasm at the news.

“I hope so.” you say, turning your head back to him for a moment before heading back into the house. You felt like it might be time to start trying to face the things you’d been running from all these years.

As he followed you back into the house, he realized that he’d asked you to stay for Joyce, but it wasn’t just her that wanted you to stay anymore.

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“I’m not happy about this either, Jim.” you grumble out, your face straight.

He throws a folder on the bed in the small space. He holds your jaw to look at your injuries. “Who put you back here? They shouldn’t have let you sit here like this.” He sighs and uncuffs you, you smell his brand of cigarettes on him as he leans on your shoulder to unlock your wrists. As your arms are freed, you groan at the feeling coming back to your muscles. “Stay here. I’ve gotta get the first aid kit.” he’s mumbling to himself, cursing under his breath.

Here he was taking care of you again. You didn’t have the same fondness for the gesture as you did when you were younger. You run your fingers through your hair and find that the small cut on your head has bled out of proportion to the injury. You could feel your swollen lip, you were sure there were other bruises forming at this point. You probably looked bad ass, you thought. You wish that you’d given off that vibe enough earlier in the evening.

He’s relieved to see you haven’t run away this time, he kneels in front of you and set the box on the bed. You wish you could say this was the first time Hopper had patched you up after a fight. He was such a boy scout.

“Tell me what happened.” he says, being attentive to the cut on your head, not looking into your eyes.

“I got in a fight. Obviously.” you say with an attitude. He pushes the cotton ball with peroxide on it roughly to your skin. “Ow. That’s a bit passive aggressive even for you, Jim.” you smirk.

“Stop being a smart ass and tell me what happened.” he scolds, going back to being gentle with you, holding your face still with his other hand. “You pickin’ fights again now? You’re a grown woman, what’s wrong with you?” he’s mad at you and you don’t entirely understand why. You had the strange pang of guilt from his words. You felt insulted and you weren’t used to words hurting your feelings. Why did you feel so sensitive and emotional lately? You’d made lots of changes you liked, but this one you weren’t a fan of.

“I’d like it if you didn’t talk to me like that.” you mumble, you move

your lips to frown but hiss as it stings more than you expect. “You don’t even know why I got in a fight.” you say defensively.

“That’s why I’m asking, Ann. Stop being so difficult. C'mere” he moves your head again to start wiping away your mess of makeup and get to your surface wounds.

“They were talking shit about you and Joyce.” you mumble as his hand obscures your speech by pressing on your cheeks.

“Half of my job is people talking shit about me. There are no fights you should ever get into on my behalf,” he instructs, his voice less angry. He reaches to throw the used cotton balls in the small wastebasket outside the cell. He sighs and rests his hand on your leg. “Joyce doesn’t need you fighting her fights either. As someone who has gotten into too many fights on her behalf, "He exhales hard and shakes his head, "Just don’t do it, kid. It never ends well when she finds out.” You nod and look at the floor.

“If I can’t beat up someone for calling you a lazy sonofabitch who’s bad at his job, AND if I can’t beat anyone up for calling my sister a crazy bitch…” You take a deep breath and look at the cuts on your hands as he touches them. “Then can I beat them up for shoving me?” you ask, your voice going lower, you’re hit with just how tired you are.

“Well, they shouldn’t have touched you.” he says obviously. “Or did you shove first?” he smirks and keeps attending to your wounds as you speak.

“I didn’t hit him first.” you say in an annoyed whisper of an explanation. “I didn’t hit him until he had to call me fat.” you let out a noise of frustration. “So fuckin’ stupid.” you shake your head back and forth, being embarrassed that that specifically was what had pushed you over the edge.

“Wait.” he holds both of your hands in his and looks into your eyes. “You beat up a GUY?” he asks, surprised.

“Yeah,” you say holding your palms up to show it wasn’t a big deal to you.

“What the hell, Annie?” he’s holding your face. You stiffen at his voice saying the name.

“Please don’t call me that.” you barely whisper, your voice giving away how tired you were. He overlooks your words.

“A guy beats you up and they bring YOU in?” he lets out a huff of a laugh. “How the hell does THAT happen?”

“I was the one on top when the cops showed up.” you chuckle nervously. “I think they took him to the hospital.” you mumble.

His laugh catches you off guard before he stops suddenly and grabs your knee again. “Wait, a grown man called you FAT?” his shoulders shakes as he laughs, looking at you with a confused face for a moment. “What kind of bullshit, playground insult is that?” he says rolling his eyes.

“Yeah. Assholes always do after you turn them down.” you roll your eyes at the thought. “Nothing new, don’t know why it was the straw that broke me.” you shake your head.

“You’re not even fat.” he says with amusement in his voice.

“It’s a lame insult.” you let out a small huff of a laugh at his attempt at a compliment. “But little boys get intimated by the curves, so their lizard brains put together an insult about the body they were just trying to get into 5 minutes earlier. Idiots.” you let out an exasperated sigh. You change the subject, you weren’t fishing for compliments from the Chief of Police. “Was I warranted for hitting him for calling me WHORE-owitz then?” you shrug your shoulders moving as you spoke. “Or for threatening me with a broken beer bottle when he hit the floor after I punched him?” you scrunch your nose as Jim rolls his eyes up to, giving you a scolding look. “ANY of that worth me defending myself, Chief?” your face is flushed with frustration at the memories.

“Now it’s hard to know if I’m mad or proud.” he finally smiles at you. He finishes wrapping your hands and gently runs his fingers over your knuckles. “As the Chief, I’m mad as hell.” he furrows his brow at you, leaning in closer to you. “But as Jim…” he grins, “I’d have paid

to see that.” You can’t help but lift at least one of the corners of your mouth up at his response. “I’m glad you beat him up so I didn’t have to.” he smiles softly again, working on the last injury, the busted lip. “Can’t have guys hitting on one of my favorite girls, now can I?”

“Shut up, Hop.” you laugh, your chest bouncing with it. “And I’m not sure if the word usage of "hitting on” was the best choice.“ you smirk.

"Yeah, you really are bad at compliments aren’t you?” he holds in a laugh, his belly moving under his uniform. Your shoulders slump slightly because he’s right. You could’ve just said thanks. You stay quiet as he works on your swollen lower lip. It stings as he cleans it and you squeeze your eyes shut for a second. “I know, I know. Sorry.” he says softly, his fingers and eyes moving quickly around your face. The shift to tenderness catches you off guard. You melt into his hands a little too much when he holds the sides of your face to look you over one last time. You fight back the sigh that wants to escape your body.

“I’ve got a few more questions and then I’m gonna let you go.” he says, putting away the first aid kit. He brings you a soda and sits across from you in the cell.

“Fine.” you reply. “Interrogate me, Chief.” you let out a noise that might’ve been classified as a giggle.

“When I pulled up your records I didn’t expect there to be so much in here, honestly.” he smirks, looking in the file.

“Oh great, I love answering questions about terrible memories I want to forget.” you laugh out loud, wincing as you hold your ribs.

“You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to.” he answers in an obvious tone.

“What do you wanna know, Chief?” you ask, leaning back in the chair, your legs spread out.

“I didn’t know you were so active in the Vietnam protests, for starters,” he asks, his voice even and genuinely interested. “I didn’t know you were involved in any of that.” the surprise is evident in his

voice.

“I…” you sigh and look away from him, you’d give him most of the story, he didn’t need to know everything. “I felt strongly about it. It took too many good people from me. I couldn’t sit and do nothing.” you explain, meeting his gaze again. You’d given him the answer he wanted, not the complete real one but, close enough.

“Then you went to New York?” he asks, looking at the paper in front of him. He laughs and looks over at you, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “We were in New York at the same time.” he seems thoroughly amused by this fact.

“Yeah I kept getting arrested and told them to send you but apparently cops don’t work like pizza guys.” you snort out a laugh and sit back up, your elbows on your knees.

“Good one,” he nods and you humbly accept his compliment this time. “You didn’t get arrested in the right places.” he smirks at you. “Good at keeping those thefts under the felony charge, though.” You let out a loud laugh that catches him off guard. You run your hand through your hair, a charming smile moving across your face as you swing your eyes back around to him. He can smell your perfume as you fluff your hair. He thought about how soft your face looked when you laughed. He became unexpectedly flustered when you locked eyes with him and leaned in closer suddenly.

“I got better at getting out of trouble the older I got, believe it or not.” you flash all your teeth in an easy going expression.

“You must have, the charges just stop after that.” he narrows his eyes at you. “Life of crime prove too hard for you?” he smirks again, your face falls slightly and he worries he’s insulted you accidentally.

“Something like that yeah.” you scrunch your nose. Once again deciding how much information to divulge to him. Not that you didn’t trust him, you were just battle-worn with worry about people using things against you. “I, uh…” you heavily sigh and see no reason to hold this back. From what you’d heard about him, he might just understand. You take a chance on him and put yourself out there. “I was in a bad place.” you say with a nod. “Someone close to me died.

I moved on to drugs, things got dark for little while there." you chew your cheek in thought. "The charges stop because I left New York and got sober." you hesitate to look back up at him. You didn't need junkie added to the hurtful things you heard hurled at you tonight.

"I shouldn't have said that, sorry." his eyes are apologetic and it both hurts and feels good to see it in his eyes for you.

You shrug it off. "You've never purposely hurt my feelings before so I didn't expect you to start now." you mumble, taking another drink of soda.

"I'm glad you realize that at least." he gives you a supportive smile, reaching out to rub your knee again.

"You don't have to look at me like I'm broken now. It was a long time ago." you cross your arms.

"I'm not. I just empathize is all." he shakes his head at you. "I've had problems dealing with people close to me leaving too." his lips are tight. You knew about his daughter and his ex-wife, Joyce had told you what she knew. You were familiar with the look of someone who had such heavy baggage they have to self-medicate to deal with life going on. You felt oddly connected to him, knowing that he understood.

"Thanks." you say roughly. You were trying, you really were. You notice how big his hand is as it squeezes your large thigh. You gulp at the touch, knowing he didn't mean anything by it, but being affected by it nonetheless. You needed to get away from him. Enough bonding over feelings between you both for one night.

3. Bars, Blankets & Bonfires.

Summary for the Chapter:

A memory from a night out, a day at the lake.

January
After a very long, honest and hard conversation with Joyce after New Years, she'd talked you into living with her. You'd suggest officially getting your own place, but she told you that if you wanted to make things up to her, you'd stay with her and help her with the boys and the house. You agreed because you'd do anything for her.

It made you crash into domestic living like a cannonball. Talk about exposure therapy. There were nights alone you'd spent sobbing at your conflicting emotions over becoming what you hated. But what was it that you really hated? You soon realized that the cooking, cleaning, fixing things, running errands…it was all things you'd been doing for yourself for years. The only difference being you were doing it all for more people now. It was harder, tons more emotional labor sure, but doing things for others was proving cathartic for you. Like you could almost chip away at how much you hated yourself everytime you did something better than you did it last time. You hope that your problem isn't that you're a truly selfish person. After this epiphany, the blackout drunk nights started to happen less frequently, at this point it'd been weeks since you'd cried yourself to sleep. Sure things weren't perfect, you could still work on cutting back on the drinking.

March
You're at the only 24-hour diner in town. The pastel colors of the room are friendly to your tired eyes. You're in a weird state of having a disorienting nap, being hungover and being physically tired from sex. You'd gone out last night, you'd made some decisions, some good, some bad. You're sipping on a combination of coffee and water, picking at a plate of plain pancakes. You're rubbing your temples and you hear a vaguely familiar sound. A slight jingle, the sound of big heavy boots and the smell of his cigarettes hits you as his feet come into view from under your hands. He sits in the same booth, you hear him grunt as he plops down and mirrors your pose.

You part your hands and lift your head to look at your old friend suffering the same fate as you. You'd both been at the same bar last night. So you both know you're wearing the same clothes as the night before, just a little worse for wear at this point in your journey.
You can't help but find the humor in the situation. You felt a strange sense of kinship with Hopper right now.

Your eyes meet for the first time after he orders a coffee. You offer him a chunk of pancake. He hesitates, looking to you for a second time to make sure you're not teasing. You shake the fork at him again, insisting. He takes it from you and shoves the carbs into his mouth and groans. He then orders himself some pancakes.

You sit in a comfortable silence for a little while. Communicating so far just fine without words. You decide to speak despite this fact.

“You’ve been out sluttin’ around tonight too I see.” your voice is deep and raspy, you let out a small chuckle to gauge his reaction.

You don’t expect the smile to spread across his face as brightly as it did, or as fast. His own tired and gravel-laden voice coughs out a belly laugh. He nods and sucks his teeth, he begins another quieter round of laughter. You can’t help but join in. The waitress brings him his coffee. You hold yours out for a toast.

“To our bad decisions.” you suggest, a tired smile on your face. He lets out a small chuckle.

“Bad decisions.” he shares your sentiment. You both noisily sip your coffee.

You cover half your face with your hand, elbow on the table as you roll your eyes at the humor you’re finding in this. You let out a heavy sigh and you both look at each other for a moment. You were both pretty much the same person right now. Having made the decisions you did the night before for much of the same reasons. You find your heart growing much fonder of Jim at this moment. He was relatable, not hiding anything. It’s hard to hide your true self from the person you sober up with after a night out at 4 AM. You realize he’s your friend again after all these years and you’re glad you aren’t hiding your emotions at this point in the night/day. You let the happy smile sit on your face for a bit, just enjoying this shared experience between two messy humans.

May

You woke up excited, you were taking the kids out to the lake, the first hot day of the year. You remember going to the lake when you were their age and you hoped they liked it as much as you had. You knew they’d be work to wrangle in, but you almost felt back in your element amongst the chaos. You’d tried to stop fighting all your feelings, but you still felt pretty stunted in that regard.

You’re bobbing amongst the boys, Jonathan and yourself shouting your checklist back and forth to each other as you finish packing the

coolers in the kitchen. You hear a rumble outside, you do a head count, everyone was here already so you head back to the living room to look out the front window. It was Jim, Your eyes narrow, why was he here? Your heart does that stupid thing you hate where it skips when he catches you by surprise. Your face falls a bit when you see Jim go around to take a big cooler out of the back of the Blazer. You gulp noisily. Was he going too?

“Oh, hell.” you quietly sigh out, making your way slowly back to the bedroom, gathering yourself mentally. You didn’t know he was coming too. Joyce was working of course but wanted you to go without her, another thing to make it up to her she’d called it. She said that a lot, you chuckled at the thought of her abusing her power. You could understand Jonathan forgetting to mention he was coming. But, how could Joyce? She should be able to tell by your body language alone, that this is something that you would want to know about beforehand. Now your adding stress, heat and partial nudity to this devil’s concoction for trouble to start with you. You wonder if you should take any alcohol at all, on second thought, maybe you should bring more. You’d elected on your solid black swim top and matching bottoms, cut off denim shorts and an old, very worn and thin flannel over the whole thing. You fluff your hair and fix your boobs unenthusiastically. You pull the edges of your suit down over the swell of your hips and ass under your shorts, shooting a wink and finger guns at yourself before pulling open the door.

Jim is standing in the group of kids, all shouting to some degree, the boys threatening to shoot their water guns off in the house. You hear Dustin’s pre-pubescent screech from the kitchen. You emerge from the room, your hand running through your hair, you stand in the hall, you look up to Jim and he’s already looking at you.

You didn’t wear things that showed a lot of skin typically. You had no problem doing so, you’d just not wanted to throw all this body in everyone’s face. It wasn’t what you wanted noticed or commented on first all the time. You knew you looked like a comic book drawing of an Amazon and that made people assume lots of things about you. Not that you had any problems with your body or sexuality, you just hated the assumptions and insecurities your appearance made others project onto you all too often. You had especially not wanted to show

too much skin around a bunch of teenage boys, the poor things have enough to deal with.

But Jim wasn't a teenager, and his very adult brain was giving away the surprise of your display of skin on his face. He walks over and stands next to you, you both look out over your army of ever in motion teens.

"I'd been dreading this all week," he says under his breath, you have to lean closer to hear him, your arms touching as you wait to turn your head to him. "But now that I know you're going too I'm not dreading it as much." Your body stiffens, you try not to react to his words and keep your cool. "I wasn't looking forward to Jonathan and I dealing with these kids by ourselves. I don't know about you but I like to relax when I go to the lake. " he says as he reaches out to slow Dustin down as he runs around the house. You let out a sigh of relief, realizing he wasn't trying to blatantly flirt with you. You'd heard he could throw around some good lines, smothered in charm from some of the other women you'd spoken to in town. You certainly believed them when you'd been on the receiving end of unintentional ones.

"I had the same thought, but I didn't know you were coming either." you chew the inside of your mouth.

"Oh, you didn't?" he swings his head over to you quickly. You shake your head as a response, looking back up at him and crossing your arms. "Joyce made me promise I'd take the kids out, then she made up my mind that this was how I'd be spending my day off today so I assumed I'd be the only chaperone." he chuckles to himself.

"I'm still doing whatever she asks so I guess we're in the same boat." you half smile, "Maybe literally today." your shoulders shake slightly as you laugh at your bad joke. "That's my bag, Will, not your's sweetie, I put yours in the car already." you shout over to Will and he enthusiastically nods and darts out the front door. Jims face smiles completely, noticing how much you're sounding and acting like your sister.

"ANNETTE!" Dustin yells from the kitchen, you shrug with a sigh and look to Jim before heading into the kitchen.

“You don’t have to use my whole name, Dustin, I’ve told you that…” you laugh as you move towards your favorite non-blood related kid.
Jim watches you swirl amongst the noisy bodies, ruffling hair and rubbing backs, scolding and praising, smoothly answering their demands and keeping them in line. He wonders why you never wanted a life like this, he thought you looked like you were where you were supposed to be.

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The kids ran immediately to the water, you were left picking up clothes and throwing them onto a towel. Your aviator sunglasses shine in the sun, the heat feels good on your skin with the wind off the lake. You turn from the edge of the water and back to the car to make your own little set up for the day. Jim moves the heavy things grunting as he plops the coolers down around the huge blanket you’d laid out. He plants the umbrella and you get out your radio and bag. You grab the sunscreen and herd in Will to smother him in it, as per Joyce’s request. The other boys laugh as you bop his nose with a line of lotion, you laugh at his cute, annoyed little face. You push him away, as he happily heads off to join the others on the dock. You make your way over to Jim who is already in a fold-out chair under the umbrella.

“Didn’t take you long to get comfortable did it?” you smile at him, finding your tanning oil in your bag.

“I told you I planned on relaxing as much as possible.” his head falls back, resting on his raised arms. His shirt falls back and you see the expanse of his broad chest as you feel your face start to flush. You clear your throat and you avert your eyes.

You sit on your knees as far away as you can get from him on the blanket. You’ve chosen a spot off to the side of the small beach to settle in today. You’d planned on having your own little nest on the beach alone. So much for that plan, you couldn’t exactly fulfill your role of cool, casual, possibly drunk, fun time aunt now but you’d manage. You watch the kids shout and splash as you shake off your shirt and start rubbing the tanning oil into your skin. You’re daydreaming, running your hands over your exposed skin mindlessly as you look far out to the hills around the lake.

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He watches you with the kids. You don't get mad when they splash you and try to pull Will away from you while you're trying to carry out Joyce's wishes. You laugh and splash them back, still shaking from it as you walk back towards the blanket you were both sharing. He gulps and watches your hands move over your exposed skin, the oil making you shine in the sun. He was glad he had such dark glasses so he could worry less about where his eyes wandered as his mind ran away with his thoughts. He found himself looking at your face, it was calm as you gently wipe away the strands of hair that have blown onto your lips as they stick to your lip gloss. Your fingers delicately holding your hair off your shoulders as you hummed contently into the breeze. He's watching your fingers slip under the straps of your top, sliding them off your arms to avoid tan lines and he has to reposition himself in the chair. He tries to distract himself.

"I didn't know you had tattoos." Jim comments, making you jump, you had almost entirely forgotten he was there. The low back of your suit exposed your shoulder tattoo, the line of skin between its hem and your bottoms leaving enough room to show part of your hip tattoo.

You hop up to your feet, dusting off your shorts and reaching for the umbrella "Yeah I try to keep it that way for a reason." you sassily reply. "I'm going to move this so I can get some sun." you explain, keeping a large section of the blanket still covered for him. He watches you from behind his glasses.

"Why?" he asks, you assume he's talking about your
tattoos and not about the umbrella since he's not an idiot.

"People ask you invasive, dumb questions and think they can touch you and I don't want that kind of attention." you calmly explain while you face away from him, trying to get out of his line of sight to take off your shorts. They join your shirt on the blanket and you rub the oil over your legs. "And there are plenty of assumptions that are made about me based on my body without adding tattoos into the mix." you sigh out. You lie on your back on the blanket, you move your hair away from you, take your glasses off and get comfortable. You make a grabby hand towards Jim "Would you please pass me my shirt, Jim?" you make an effort to make your tone nicer. That was another new thing you were trying out.

You hear the chair creak and a grunt as your shirt is thrown onto your face and he huffs out a quiet laugh as your still open hand gives him a thumbs up. “Thanks.” you take the shirt and make a pillow out of it. You take in a deep breath and try to relax. “Please do a head count on the kids from time to time for me?” you ask, wiggling your toes as your body tingled with heat.

“Already on it, Annie.”

“Psh. Annie.” you tsk. “Last guy that called me that I threatened to bash his skull in.” you let out a sudden, genuine laugh at the memory.

“Maybe you shouldn’t tell me that.” his laugh mirrors yours.

“Yeah, but it was Lonnie.” you grin wide, your eyes still shut to protect them from the light of the sun beaming down at you.
He lets out a throaty deep laugh, you hear his hand slap some part of his body.

“I take it back,” you hear the chair crunch as he moves. “I do want to hear this story.”
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You’ve been easily chatting with Jim off and on between teen herding shifts, meals, and snacks. You had been back under the umbrella with him for most of the day now, but your skin still radiated that absorbed warmth, leaving the faint scent of coconuts behind. Your hair is wavy from swimming, your muscles that perfect amount of tiredness in coordination with where the sun hung in the sky. You watched Jim move around near the edge of the water. You’d put your shorts back on, using the chair he’d been sitting in. You sip at the long neck bottle, sweating in the heat, the perspiration running down your fingers and hitting your thighs.

Jim had interrupted yours and Jonathans long conversation over the collection of cassettes you’d brought with you. Music was something you’d always used to connect with your nephews and it gave you the warm and fuzzies when you’d come back to find that your oldest had formed his own particularly good taste in music. You, of course, gave yourself partial credit for this.

The sun headed down in the sky. It's almost twilight and the wind is getting cooler as it whips your hair around your face. You see Jim pointing and directing the pack of boys, trying to build a bonfire. You can hear his booming voice shouting commands, his strong arms flexing at the edges of his short-sleeved shirt as he moves logs and branches across the beach. You can understand why he's the Chief, he is awfully good at taking control. A badly intentioned smile spreads across your face at the thought. You let out a low chuckle to yourself, biting your lip, indulging yourself for a moment. Not like there was much eye candy here in Hawkins anyway, might as well. It was a shame he was such a good guy, so much else about him made him almost your type.

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You sit around a bonfire, a small lopsided one, but the kids seemed happy with it. You've unzipped the square box that holds your cassettes, your fingers move over them, Jonathan points out ones he likes.

"Why don't you play the one you put on at the house when you're getting ready to go out?" he suggests, picking it up and looking at it.

"Nah those aren't…" you twitch your nose, "That's more romantic, I need more dancey," you explain, shaking your shoulders for emphasis.

"Well I've seen you and mom drunk dancing to this one, maybe you should play it." he smirks, holding out an SJ 60's labeled box and you snort.

"Yeah, that one is even worse." you almost blush.

"I thought you'd want something with a little romance in it after the day you've had." he says with a small breathy laugh.

You turn your head with an exaggerated expression of confusion. "What?" you ask, the word coming out high pitched. You're interrupted suddenly by a head of bouncing curls dashing towards you.

"Whatcha got Annette?!" Dustin shouts, sliding in the sand on his

knees and stopping with his hands on either side of the box. You grinned up at his toothless smile.

“We’re trying to pick out some music, Dusty,” you explain moving your hand over the tapes. “Weren’t you helping with fixing dinner?” you ask, his excited eyes looking at the box of multicolored rectangles.

“Yeah but they started yellin’ at me.” he mumbles, picking a tape and inspecting it close to his face.

“What did they yell at you about?” Jonathan says with amusement in his voice.

“Hopper made me leave because I kept breaking all the hot dogs trying to put them on the stupid sticks.” he mumbles, sighing heavily and putting the tape back down. You laugh quietly at his words, reaching out and patting his shoulder.

“Well, that means you get to help me out instead. You wanna help me decide what music to listen to? It’s very important, sets the whole mood for the evening.” you scrunch your nose and laugh at his frowning face that turns into a smile as you enthusiastically react to his involvement. He nods and grins, his eyes going back to the box.

“What are all these handwritten ones?” he asks with that faux disinterest that finds it’s way to every teen’s voice from time to time.

“Those are ones we’ve made. The others are just normal store bought ones.” Jonathan chimes in, pointing out the difference.

“Interesting,” he says nodding, bringing his hand to his chin to rub it. He was so dramatic, you couldn’t help but love the kid, he reminded you of yourself when you were his age. “Are they arranged by date too?” He’s a lot smarter than you were at that age, always managing to be aloof and observant simultaneously.

“You’ve got by decade, like these,” you point to the cluster of 60’s, 70’s and 80’s. “You’ve got by mood and occasion,” you continue, to the group of Sad, Happy, Break Up, Driving, etc.

“You’ve got a real nice organizational system.” he nods, his lips

coming together tightly as he reads the others. You figured your niche approach would interest him with the way his mind seemed to work. “What the hell does California mean then?” he asks, his finger hitting the small section of tapes with state names over them. You laugh at his swearing. You never stopped the kids from swearing much to Joyce and Jim’s chagrin.

“Those are places I’ve lived. I made tapes that remind me of when I lived there.” you explain as Lucas slides in next to him, his expression in enthusiastic.

“Lived where?” he asks, slightly out of breath from whatever he’d been doing before. He and Dustin are perched in the same position kneeling with their hands on their knees in the sand.

“She lived in California, get with it, Lucas.” he says exasperated and Lucas’ chin goes back into his neck, narrowing his eyes at the other boy. He opens his mouth to respond but shakes his head, looking at the tapes himself.

“I was explaining what the tape titles meant.” you quietly and calmly explain to the newest member of the group you were gathering unintentionally.

“You’ve lived in a lot of places.” Lucas mumbles, reading. California, Indiana, New York, Florida, Texas. Washington might’ve been your favorite, it was the last place you’d been before you headed back to Hawkins. Every place with at least one guy attached to the memories.

“So is this like…music from the 1920’s?” Dustin asks, holding out a tape too close to your face for you to see it. You chuckle and lean back, reading the label Teens/Early 20s.

“Ha! No. That’s the other kind, those are by what I listened to by age.” you smirk at the thought of the songs on the tape.

“So this is from when you were our age?” Lucas asks, you see the wheels turning in his head.

“We should listen to that one.” Jonathan suggests, holding his hand out to see the tape. Dustin smacks it into his hand clumsily. Jonathan

has an amused look on his face at the boy, standing and taking the tape out of its box before you could argue. “Maybe we can embarrass both you and Hopper with this one.” he smirks, taking it the stereo.

(Listen to the mix tape here.)

“Yes. Payback.” Dustin whispers.

“You’re still mad because he made you leave, aren’t you?” Lucas asks, rolling his eyes at him. You begin to stand, stretching and looking around the beach, doing a head count. Everyone except the biggest of your group of boys was here. Where’d Jim run off to? You wonder.

“I don’t like being spoken to like I’m some stupid kid.” Dustin says annoyed as they both take your lead and stand.

“Well, you are a stupid kid, so…” Lucas responds flatly.

“No I’m not!” Dustin says, shoving Lucas’s shoulder. You walk between the two of them, separating them before it escalates. You put a hand on each of their backs.

“Nobody is a stupid kid, alright?” you say loudly to the both of them. “If you’re too busy fighting among yourselves, you can’t beat a final boss, can you?” you lower your voice.

“No.” they both answer unenthusiastically.

“Don’t fight each other. Don’t make me act like a mom. You don’t want that do you?” you try to appeal to their sense of equality amongst themselves, the party mentality. None of them ever wanted to be mean or fight with each other, it happened plenty but they were good-natured boys.

“No.” they mumble in unison.

“Then be good for me, please.” you chirp at them. Giving them a final pat and picking up your box of cassettes to sit back with the rest of your things in the car.

The smell of Jim’s cigarettes hits your nose before you see it coming to the other side of his Blazer. You see him leaning against the big

back of the vehicle, you slink around the side of the car to see what he's up to.

"You hiding back here, bud?" you ask him in a sweet voice. He side-eyes you as you stand in his line of sight. He gives you an amused smile. "I think the boys are almost done burning all the food we bought." you laugh, your hands going to the pockets of your jean shorts.

"Yeah I figured it was cigarettes for dinner again." his voice low from yelling at the kids.

"The New York diet, huh?" you say with a fake tone of being impressed. "That's what all the girls I knew in New York did anyway. Wasn't aware you were watching your girlish figure." you tease, bumping him with your hip. He huffs out a laugh at you, looking down over his shoulder at you.

"Nah." he exhales up into the night sky. "I couldn't add devastatingly handsome along with being smart, charming and funny. Wouldn't be fair, would it?" Your face scrunches up with laughter and your shove his arm, using it to propel yourself away from him, now standing in front of him.

"Don't make me compliment you, Jim." you scold him, a hand on your hip, the other with a finger pointed to his chest. He rolls his eyes and as his hand moves away from his body you hold his wrist and take the cigarette out of his hands, taking a drag as he looks at you, shaking his head.

"It would seem I need to give some of my charm to you." he lets out a low laugh, "You're supposed to ask before you take things, you know." he lets the smile work itself across his whole face as you keep smoking, lit under the light of the only pole on this side of the parking lot. Your expression under different circumstances would've felt predatory, but now it made him eat his words. Your lips smile slowly around the tip of his cigarette, you exhale and lick your lips, maintaining eye contact with him.

"Well that's the big difference between me and you, isn't it Jimmy?" you say in a dark velvet voice. He asks you what you mean by his

expression. “You ask first. I just take what I want.” you grin smugly, handing him back the cigarette. Your expression turns back to warm and playful, losing its edge.

“Thanks.” he says flatly, not feeling sure about how to respond to you. Your head turns fast back to the beach. His ears pick up the notes of a song playing from that direction. He sees your shoulders and hips start to move. By the time the lyrics “Sugar Pie Honeybunch” are heard you’re already swinging, moving your head to the beat.

“They picked out one of my tapes.” you say dancing in a circle, paying no mind to Jim’s expression, your eyes shut, your hair whirling as you whipped it back and forth. “So, Auntie Ann is gonna go dance and embarrass her babies.” you say shooting finger guns to him and shaking all the way down to the bonfire. He watches you move back into the darkness of the beach, then you’re lit by the fire. He sees you grab Will off of the log he’s sitting on and wrapping him in your arms as you sing to him, bopping, trying to loosen him up. Jonathan laughs outside of the light of the fire by the radio.

As Jim crushes his cigarette into the ground, heading back down to the beach, not being able to hold back his relation to the lyrics, “I can’t help myself.” as he smirks, sauntering back down to your whirling form.

“My mom likes this song.” Lucas says, wiggling his elbows and knees awkwardly.

“She sounds like a cool lady.” you say, spinning around near the water’s edge.

“Yeah, my mom listens to it after she drinks too much wine and dad’s went to bed already.” Mike says out of the side of his mouth with a small shake of his head, finding what he’d said to be funny.

“Me and your mom should hang out more.” you laugh, your feet enjoying the lingering warmth left in the water from the sun.

“Sounds like every Saturday night for you.” Jonathan says with amusement, making eye contact with you. You hear Jim laugh at his

joke and you turn to glare at him and he shrugs.

“Kids got a point.” he says, crossing his arms.

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“Ride with us!” you hear Dustin yell from Jim’s Blazer being pulled back with a sound of pain by one of the other boys. All the boys wanted to drive back together this time, so you were letting them take over Hopper’s car, knowing he could get them to behave. Jim’s window was rolled down, his arm over the side, looking back at the window Dustin yelled out of.

“Hey! No hitting!” he shouts at them.

You walk up to the back window. “You’re in here like sardines already, why on earth do you want me to come too?”

“I have questions!” Dustin’s enthuses, his hands waving as Mike shoves him away.

“That can’t wait until we get home where we’ll be all night?”

“Alright, Annette, I’m going to level with you here. When we get home, we’re going to crash. Hard. Oh, we’ll try to fight it! But sleep will take us!” his fist raises dramatically. He was so excitable.

“Just get to the point dude, geez.” Lucas groans.

“Will told us that you used to date a guy that worked at NASA and I have Star Wars related questions.” You openly laugh and shake your head.

“I’m afraid I didn’t work at NASA so I don’t think I’d be much help.” you offer.

“Have you seen Star Wars?” he asks you with attitude.

“Yes.” you answer, narrowing your eyes at him questioningly.

“Did you see a shuttle launch?” he asks with the same tone, just louder.

“Well…yeah.” you raise an eyebrow at him.

“Then I still have questions! Come on, you’re wasting time!” he yells through the remaining open space as he rolls up the window between the two of you.

You step back and move the few feet to Hopper’s window. “They’re so cute at this age, aren’t they?” you ask him sarcastically, speaking low despite the boys being quiet so they could eavesdrop in the back.

“Bunch of angels.” he grumbles, his hand running over his face.

“You mind if indulge them and ride with you?” you scrunch your nose to persuade him.

“No, of course not, come on.” his voice higher pitched and tired. He reaches to roll up the window.

“Thanks.” you say sincerely, tapping the metal door of the car before running to Jonathan in the other car, he’s messing with the radio.

“The kids want me to ride with them, is that alright? I don’t want you to drive alone unless you want to.” you say sweetly.

“That’s fine with me. I want to find out what’s on this New York tape anyway.” he shakes his head, popping it in the console.

“You sure?” you ask, leaning in the window.

“Yeah go have fun with Hopper.” he looks up at you like he had a secret you didn’t know. You narrow your eyes at him.

“Maybe I will. Maybe we’ll have SO much fun we’ll fall in love and get married and have babies.” you swoon sarcastically, animatedly, rolling your eyes and giving his thin shoulder a playful shove afterward. He shrugs and lets out a small smug laugh. “Get out of here you crazy kid with your conspiracy theories.” you add walking backward away from him.

“Stranger things have happened.” he reminds you.

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Dustin's prophecy was foretold and they fell asleep before you even got home. You couldn't deny how cute they were as they slept.

All the sleeping bags were out of the floor, they'd had a nap and now they were gathered around books and papers in the living room. Sci-Fi movie on late night tv, one low light lamp and the creak of a settling house as the air started to cool the longer the night went on. Once no one has asked you for anything for a few minutes, you grab your bottle of whiskey and head to the screened in back porch. You light a cigarette, letting the breath out that you'd been holding in all day over getting everyone back here and intact.

"Everyone out?" Jim's voice is low as he sneaks into the small room with you.

"Joyce is in bed and Jonathans running interference until he falls asleep, all the boys are winding down." you let out a sigh and unscrew the top of the bottle. "Looks like we made it through another day." you toast to yourself, taking a big drink. You hand it to Jim, he takes a swig, handing it back. "Time to engage possibly drunk aunt mode." you laugh to yourself.

"You handle them really well, by the way," he says, turning his head towards you, his elbows on his knees.

Your eyes look over at him wide. He'd worn down your hard exterior by being a great cowboy to wrangle in the kids today with you. He was a charming conversation partner, especially when you had as much history as the two of you did. You didn't feel so tense around him like you had. Your muscles didn't want to move your body away as fast as possible, you were feeling comfortable and that was something new. Especially around someone as infamous in your mind as Jim Hopper.

"I know you told me you hated the thought of being "domesticated" but," he shrugs, letting you know you might not like what he's about to say. "You stay calm around them and you don't baby them too much, which I'm a big fan of." his eyes twinkle a little as they catch the low light, his smile is really what pulls your attention though.

"They aren't as bad as I thought they'd be to deal with. But they also

aren't mine so…that really helps." you snort out a laugh.

"Yeah, you can get rid of them when they start acting up." he chuckles.

"The pros of being an aunt." you laugh and sigh, crossing your legs.

"You make an excellent one." he nods and looks back out the window.

"I'm not great with compliments when they're something actually nice so I'll just say…thank you." you grumble the last words, and he huffs out an amused sound at you. You sit in silence as you take another drink and recover from the burn.

"I really enjoyed myself today." he says quietly, dipping his head down.

You turn your head to him with a lazy smile. "Yeah I did too." you say sincerely back, smiling in a way that was wholesome and not an attempt to cover something with humor.

"I'm really glad you stayed." he sighs, almost like he didn't want to say it, his hands clasp together in front of him.

"Me too." you whisper, feeling your own hesitancy to talk about it as well. You take another swig and set the bottle on the floor as you concentrate on nothing in particular in the tree line of the woods out the window.

4. Drunk & Disscussions

May
He stood in the doorway, his arms crossed as he looked down at the two of you.

You'd brought Joyce to bed, but had decided in your drunken state to just lay down in the bed with her. Joyce was winding down, she'd exceeded her usual amount of wine and he knew if he could just separate her from you she would fall asleep as soon as she stopped talking.

He was currently trying to get you to the couch. He knew you'd be mad if he'd let you fall asleep in Joyce's bed with you being this drunk. He didn't want to be on the receiving end of one of your hungover angry phone calls.

"Come on Annie, you've gotta get on the couch." he says for the 15th time.

"Fuck off." you say playfully. Both of you snort laugh in the bed.

"She's not gonna do it Hop." Joyce mumbles, her face full of laughter, even though her eyes kept wanting to close.

"Yes she is." he says determined to break this loop he's been stuck in with you two for the past 20 minutes. He moves to the foot of the bed, grabbing your naked foot and shaking it. You kick your feet at him and shake your head. He's trying not to look under your nightgown as you wiggle and it rides up your thighs.

"I'm going to pick you up and take you to the living room if you don't get up and go yourself." he holds out his arms in an attempt to show you he's serious. "Those are your options." he nods his head at you sharply.

You laugh at him, one foot still wiggling at him. "Try it, big boy." you let out a low laugh and Joyce blows a raspberry before she follows your lead and starts laughing again.

"You did this to yourself, woman," he grunts as he moves quickly and reaches down to grab your legs behind your knees, pulling you down to him so he can lift you up and carry you to the other room.

He doesn't like how long he lets himself stay leaning over you, between your legs. Your gown having moved up as he pulled you towards him, now up over your hips. He tried not to look so closely that he saw the lace around the edges of your panties. He'd really tried not to look at you like that. But he couldn't bring himself to look away from the soft, surprised look on your face as he touched you, laying there pouting with your hair fanned across the sheets, a soft audible gasp escaping your lips. He grabs your waist and you slowly wrap your arms around his neck. When he lifts you off the bed with his hands and arms splayed across your butt and thighs, your legs lock around him. He's relieved and surprised you've accepted this and don't fight him too much after your loud disapproval to the idea of being moved just moments before. You whine into his neck, burying your face there. He can't help but laugh to himself at the grumpy noises you made as you wrapped your arms around him tighter and yawned.

He moves his knee to the couch to lay you down on it, one arm on the back to support him and an arm across your back to support you.

But when your back hits the couch you don't let go of him. He stops for a minute, trying to see your face to make sure you're alright.

"You gotta let go now." he scolds. "That's how this works." he tries to gently coax you off of him.

You release your arms, they fall beside you with a thump, your elbows pushing your breasts together as they squeeze into your sides as you sigh. Despite your chest being flaunted so closely to him, he can't help but be more interested in the way those big brown eyes of yours looked up at him. The way your dark lashes fluttered, your pupils large, dark and deep and on the edge of words and actions he thought you'd regret in the morning. You unlock your ankles but you don't move your legs from around him.

He starts to lift his weight off of you and you let out a needy groan as your legs reluctantly fall from around him. One of your hands makes it to his shirt in time to grab it before he's too far from the warmth of your body.

"Jim." you whine. He closes his eyes at the sound of you saying his name like that.

"Yeah?" he asks quietly, moving your hair away from your face for you. He can't help but feel that pull from the magnetic force you seem to be emitting towards him.

"Hold me." you beckon him, tugging at his shirt.

"Ann, you're...very drunk." he says, shaking his head, not bothering to hide the charmed expression on his face at your pouting. You make him feel weak for a few heavy moments, his hand moves to the side of your lustful face. He lets out a body slumping sigh at the sight of you. You frown at him, your lips pout as you let out a small moan as he touches you. He wants to trail his thumb over your trembling bottom lip but he stops himself. He pulls his hands away from you completely, knowing he has to stop.

"You'll come runnin' back." you murmur, letting him go, your hand falling to your chest, you look away from him to the couch, he thought you might start to cry, but your eyes flutter shut.

He'd think about this night for months on end but you'd never remember it.

June

He calls you again, it's still busy. He rolls his eyes and hangs the phone back up forcefully.

Joyce opens the door with a pleasant hello.

"You know I tried to call twice and you're phone's been busy?" he asks gruffly, taking off his coat, his eyes scan the house for you.

"Sorry, it's Annie, she's been on the phone for hours now." she shakes her head but wears a smile on her face, heading back into the kitchen from where she'd been sitting. Jim stalks behind her and settles. He can hear you speaking in Joyce's bedroom.

"Who is she talking to for that long?" he asks, taking a drink from the can of Schlitz.

"One of her old friends, she talks to him about once a month like this." she explains, her hands motioning to your location as she spoke.

"Anyone I know?" he asks, trying not to look too interested.

"No, he's from, California I think?" she scrunches her face, trying to remember if that was correct.

"California?" his brow moving as his chin pushes back into his neck in surprise.

"She lived there for years, Hopper." Joyce rolls her eyes at him.

His face frowns. "Oh." He's starting to realize there is a lot he doesn't know when it comes to you.

"Well, you know how much she shares about herself." Joyce says sarcastically, readjusting her legs in the chair.

"Yeah, I've noticed." he raises his eyebrows in agreement. "Used to she wouldn't shut up and now she," he stops to chuckle, "Well she still won't shut up sometimes, " the chuckle grows softer. "But now she's a lot more..." he moves his head to show he's thinking of the word.

"Sneaky?" you whisper loudly, putting a hand on his back as you lean between the two of them at the table. His head turns fast and he see's you grinning down at him, a look resembling victory on your face at getting the slip on him.

"That wasn't the word that came to mind." he mumbles, the look of being caught off guard on his face, clearing his throat. You loved it when he looked at you like that.

"I'm off the phone with Teddy. I held up the line, I'm sorry." you give a dramatic apologetic smile and she puts her hand over yours, resting on her shoulder.

Your hand feels like it sends a searing heat through his shirt as you rub mindless circles on his back as you speak sweetly to Joyce. He takes a drink, taking the chance to look you over as your hips bumped up against his arm. Your hair in big curls, the lipstick you're wearing matches your red dress. You still have your same leather jacket on as usual.His expression is full of judgement for your choice in clothing tonight. He tunes back into the conversation to distract from the cleavage you're showing, bent over at the waist next to him.

"He should be coming in for my birthday, I'm so fuckin' excited." you beam at her, leaning in close as she looks up you adoringly. You did seem to be in a good mood. He wondered who the hell Teddy was. "I've missed the big guy." you sigh out, looking up at nothing in particular. You snap out of it quickly, bringing your hands back to yourself, smoothing your dress over your thighs. "I've gotta head out or I'll be late. I lost track of time." you kiss Joyce on the top of the head. "Again." you say with a quick loud laugh as this was no surprise to anyone.

"You got a date Annette?" he says in a mischievous tone. You stop on your way to the door and turn to look at him and narrow your eyes at him. "Maybe." you look over at Joyce and wink so she knows you're messing with him. "Maybe I've got two." you sway back over,

standing behind his shoulder, your hand on your hip. You let out a snort of a laugh, "Why? You need to have them come pick me up while you sit on the couch with your revolver?" you laugh and pick at him, you shove his shoulder playfully.

"No, I was gonna give you some advice actually," he says, shrugging, now winking at Joyce. Her brow goes low in preparation for whatever awful thing he's going to say next.

You move your hand out as if to tell him he's welcome to give said advice.

"I thought you might want to try showing a little cleavage on your dates next time, maybe they'd start calling you back." his face is straight even though he's prepared to be punched in the arm by you. Instead of hitting him you give him one of those charming, hand to chest, head thrown back laughs you haven't given to anyone else besides him. Don't think he hasn't noticed.

"Wow. Fuck you, Hopper, " you say with a laugh, dragging out the words. You ruffle his hair and he swats you away, you give him the finger, pushing your hand to his face to make sure he sees it. You snort and he lets out big dumb, low chuckling noise. You walk to the front door, body still moving with your laughter.

"Goodnight Joyce." you give her a sweet nod, blowing her a kiss as you head to the door. "I love you, you're wonderful, you're beautiful." you turn your head dramatically to Jim. "And fuck you, Jimmy. You're an asshole," you pause and point your finger at him before you laugh again, "You're mean and your cigarettes are shit." your head moves as you tease and taunt him. You stand in the doorway. Jim just nods in agreement and keeps grinning. You give a slight bow to them both. "Don't wait up, kids. Love ya." you wave as you shut the door behind you.

As Jim finally stops laughing after you've gone, Joyce gives him a hit to the arm since you hadn't.

"You're lucky you two have that mean, crude sense of humor. Any other woman would've slapped your face for that." she has a half smile despite her scolding tone. It was awfully nice to see and hear

him laugh like that. She hadn't heard that laugh in a long time.

"Yeah I know," he lets out a small huff of a laugh. He keeps looking at his beer can with a smirk on his face. Joyce narrows her eyes at him, resting her chin on her hand. "I thought all three of us were hanging out tonight." he tries to swing back into normal conversation.

"She forgot to tell me she was going out." pursing her lips and rolling her eyes at your lapses in memory. Jim nods in understanding. "But it sort've worked out because I think we need to talk." she drags out the last word along with her finger on the table top. Jim's eyes go wide and he looks over at her.

"We do?" his voice low with dread.

"Yeah. I think we do." she says wistfully.

5. Preference & Proposition

July

You'd run into some old friends while out killing time in town weeks ago. You'd found some respite in going out with them on occasion. They would dance and drink and you'd flirt if there happened to be anyone cute around. It was a great way to blow off steam. Getting away from your blood and non-blood related family members and feeling like you were spontaneous and fun again was still the main focus of these excursions. You had to get your kicks somewhere. You had taken them up on an offer to get out of Hawkins and find a

different bar from your usual stomping grounds. You really needed more nights out, you welcomed the change of scenery.

He'd driven farther out than usual, trying to escape the things that plagued him in Hawkins but there you were, one of the things he was trying to ignore. Of all the bars, you were in this one. He finds a spot to go unnoticed by you, watching you. He didn't like the fact that he was compelled to now.

He thought you might be getting too drunk at first. He could hear your loud laugh across the bar, one he could not remember hearing or seeing before. You flipped your hair and spoke animatedly with your hands, you looked like you were enjoying yourself. He hadn't seen you act this way since you'd been back. The way you sat quietly and thoughtfully as the others in your booth left to go to the bathroom told him you weren't as drunk as he'd previously thought.

He sat in his booth alone, nursing his hard liquor. He sighed as he averted his eyes from your moving body as you danced. He felt entirely too on edge to have the visions of you moving your hips like that in his brain. The last thing he needed was another distraction. He longed for the days when you'd first come back, when you weren't friends again, just a familiar stranger. He misses when you were more difficult. When your interactions felt more like a punishment than a reward. As your behaviors kept changing, he saw the genuine nature of all your actions, and how you were unapologetically yourself. He especially missed when he hadn't found you to be so lovely. Back before the idea of him liking you as more than a friend had surfaced because now he had to deal with that rattling around in the back of his mind whenever he saw you. He tried to keep that thought in the back of his mind, but on particularly hard nights, like tonight, it was hard to not to.

He'd seen you dance with the kids but this was...not the same. He thought about having to push back the intrusive thoughts on your twisting form from that night at the lake. Tonight the way you bit your lip and threw your head back, your hands roaming over your body made him groan and turn to look out the window. He hadn't been this attracted to you until you'd taken his advice gracefully and stayed. So he supposes this was all his own fault. He found himself

annoyed at your self-improvement at what felt like the expense of his peace of mind. He was wary of you at first and thought you were a bit much, the tendency to think of you as acting like a child left over from years past. But as he saw you not only change but excel at it, you unknowingly won him over. The way you laughed at his bad jokes started to make him smile long after the fact. The way you embarrassed your nephews, showering them with affection noticeably pulled at his heartstrings. You had become so unknowingly charming to him that he had thought from time to time when he was up too late and alone too long about what it might be like to be with you. He'd had no intentions of acting on any of this.

But after he saved Will, after taking in El...he found himself more open. He didn't hate himself as much as he used to, not by much but anything was an improvement. Those closest to him had noticed the underlying lightness of his demeanor under that heavy layer of exhaustion that was always there. He wanted to deny it, but he started to wonder if things were getting better with time. Maybe he was starting to believe it for himself again. Maybe there was a tiny bit of hope left in him somewhere that his life could be more than working on trying to fix everyone else's problems just to go to bed alone every night with all of his own problems plaguing him. Maybe Joyce was right.

He'd gotten lost in another train of thought as he see's you bop out the door later that night. He stays behind for a minute, not hearing your bike. He pays and slinks out the door to find you. He sees you sitting on your bike, smoking and moving your upper body to the beat of a song he was too far away to hear.

You drank and danced, were still dancing when the other women started to falter. You begrudgingly accept their apologies and stayed back to dance alone and sober up. Once your moves and the fact that you were alone started getting noticed you made your way to your bike, lit under a street lamp on the side of the building. You sat sideways, your radio low, smoking and sobering up. You take your jacket off to let the sweat wick away from you in the night air. You fan the looser t-shirt you'd cut into a tank top with low sides, exposing the band of your bra. You felt a little bit like a sexpot in it but lately, you'd been feeling that about yourself in general. You

assume it was because you hadn't slept with anyone for so long and the overstimulating summer heat.

You recognize the shape of his hat, his tall silhouette moving towards you, you laugh, your shoulders shaking and you wave to him.

"Stalk me much, Hop?" you grin at him, watching his shoulders shift as he gets closer.

"You callin' me Hop now?" he mumbles while he lights a cigarette to help himself sober up.

"Well it seems not many people call you Jim anymore." you swing your leg over the bike, facing in the wrong direction as he puts his weight on the back, holding the rail.

"They don't." he nods, inhaling sharply. "Doesn't mean you have to stop calling me that though." you nod in agreement.

"You prefer it if I call you Jim?" you ask, tilting your head, you wondered if he was drunk, his face was awfully easy to read. You chewed your lips to hide a smirk from his adorable attempt to get around saying what he wanted from you. He pauses a moment, looking around before meeting your eyes again.

"Yeah." he nods and squints, exhaling smoke away from you. "It doesn't make much sense for you to call me what everyone else does, does it?" he adds, standing, one hand going into his jean pocket. You squint at him, you knew you weren't anywhere near drunk enough to mishear his words. "You aren't like everyone else so why would you call me what they do?" he asks, it feels rhetorical. "I like it when you call me Jim." he finally admits as you'd waited him out with silence.

"Then I'll call you Jim." you smile at him, trying to engage him again, he seemed sad tonight. "I could pick a nickname if you'd like." you reach out to poke at him, he swats at your hand, the corner of his mouth twitching, he was fighting a smile.

"No, thank you, Jim is fine." he rolls his eyes, fighting your teasing.

"You sure Jimmy?" you tilt your head at him.

"You call me that whether I want you to or not" he holds in a laugh, you see his stomach move with it.

"What about Chief?"

"That's a title, not a nickname." he shrugs, you could see his amusement in his eyes at you.

"Chiefo." you snort, he moves closer the bike. He shakes his head, corner of his mouth raised at you.

"El jefe." you add, moving your shoulders back and forth. "That's all I've got." you add, shrugging and sighing at your own ridiculousness. You find yourself willing to be silly around someone besides your family, but Jim almost felt like family at this point.

"I'd say 2 languages is enough." he nods, sucking his teeth at you. "Show off."

"I don't have a lot to show off with so, I gotta take it where I can get it." you admit with a deep laugh. He returns your laughter and bites his lip at you while you wipe the eyeliner from under your eyes, your chest bouncing as your laughs turn into audible breaths. He pulls back, he's getting too close. He'd been drinking, your charms had lulled him for a pleasant moment.

You pull your hair up on top of your head, fanning yourself. His trained eyes catch the heart tattoo he hadn't seen before, he didn't think you could hide much more since he'd seen you in your bathing suit but you kept being full of surprises.

It's a red heart, he can make out the first letter on the banner across it, J.

AUGUST

You've been cleaning for a good part of the morning. You kept finding your way into the kitchen, looking out the window with your lip between your teeth.

You take a box of winter clothes that you'd cleaned out of the closet, left over from the last season and set it in the sunroom with the other boxes in the corner of the room where you kept the overflow of things. You could see him through the screened windows better in here, but he could also see you, and you did not want him to see the look on your face and your body language. You groan to yourself, slumping your shoulders dramatically, and turning to go back in the house. How long had he been here? Did it really matter? Were you going to find an excuse to go outside and get up close and personal with what was honestly like someone pulled a fantasy of yours out of your head? Yes.

For the longest time, you'd given in to whims and pleasures, damning the consequences. You'd had to stop doing that when you decided to stay here. You were longing for the days when you could seize opportunities, like this one, without the worry of regret and worst of all, living with the consequences of your actions. You knew your bullshit would catch up with you eventually and here you were. You knew one day you would have to make the decision to be mature about your impulses. You're especially surprised that Jim was a factor in this decision. You never thought this decision would be made in your sister's kitchen.

You'd be lying if you said you hadn't spruced yourself up and fixed your boobs before you took the drinks out to him. You were glad the kids weren't here because the shorts you wore were what you affectionately referred to as your 'fuck me' denim shorts. Sure you were being a bit...flirtatious but it'd been so long and he just looked so good right now. Maybe it was the heat, you could always blame the heat and the full moon if you acted up. If you didn't get out there and try to flirt if for nothing but for fun, you'd regret it. How often was it that the universe sent you a real-life lumberjack.

The ache in your thighs gets worse the closer you get. You see the pile of wood stacked against the side of the house growing as he grunts and tosses another piece on the stack. Although you could've done this yourself, only at a much slower pace that he was, you'd enthusiastically agreed with Joyce when she'd passive-aggressively worked Hopper into offering to cut the wood for the fireplace for the soon approaching cool nights and fall weather.

This was a fantasy you'd never gotten to indulge in, and although you weren't going to get to indulge in it today, you could at least save the memories for later. Sweat is rolling off his broad shoulders, down his back and arms, the loose ends of his hair are stuck to his skin, he's breathing heavily. He looked at broad as a barn next to you, his body growing and shrinking with every swing of that ax. He was checking off all your boxes and it was hard not to gawk. You hated how obviously you reacted when you were pent up. Sure you thought Jim was handsome before, but seeing him chopping wood for you was holding a death grip on your pussy and you had no clue how to get rid of it realistically. So you decided not to fight it. Plus the more you flirted with Jim, the better you two got at it, and you needed a good sparring partner.

"C'mon, ya gotta hydrate." you chirp at him. Water in one hand, beer in the other. Jutting one hip out, standing behind him. He acts oblivious to you, taking the water with a nod, drinking in a few gulps, placing it back in your hand, taking the beer and chugging it back and placing it back in your hand. You stand there and look up at him from under your lashes because the boots he wore added another 2 inches at least onto the big boy. You were in your bare feet and you'd never felt so small next to him before. He gives you a big grin and a nod.

"Thanks, sweetheart." he huffs out grabbing the ax and going back to work. You stand there motionless. Your mouth had trouble closing, as your eyelashes fluttered and your skin flushed. So much for being a cool, flirtatious sexual dynamo.

"For fuck's sake." you mutter under your breath at the way your heart thumped. The thought occurred to you that maybe you needed to break down and buy another vibrator.

"Hmm?" he asks, his torso turning back towards you again. You smile and let out a nervous laugh.

"I'll get you some more." you say too quickly, turning and walking back into the house.

He looked at you walking away, the same way you watched him raise that ax up and down. Exhaling through puckered lips, shaking his

head and getting back to work, working out his frustrations through physical labor.

You sneak outside again, it's even hotter now, the morning long since passed. You feel more prepared this time as you speak. He is now grunting and groaning, not helping out your attempt to be cool about this. His shoulders shaking every time the ax hit the wood, oblivious to you. The perspiration from the glass and can run down your fingers and arms, you decide to pick one of the dirtier jokes you'd thought of while watching him work all morning.

"Watching your technique all morning has made me wonder if you could split me apart like that." you say flirtatiously, a dark feminine laugh rumbling in after your one-liner.

He leaves the ax in the stump, stilling for a moment before you see his head drop and his shoulders start to shake in laughter. He turns around, face squinting in the sun, his hand running his hair back, wiping the sweat away from his face.

"That's...wow." he says slowly nodding his head in thought, a deep, building laughing coming from his chest. "That's...graphic." he says like it's a question, as you let out a small snort at his comment. "I think that might've made me blush." you both laugh at his coy tone. With your hands occupied, you swing your hip to him, which has the dish towel you'd brought him in your back pocket. He gives you a flirtatious smirk at your boldness and yanks the towel out of your back pocket with a hard tug, moving your body with it. "I've not heard that one before." he says impressed.

"That's because it's original." you smile, regaining your balance and standing back up correctly as he rubs the towel harshly over his face, neck, and hair. He puts the towel over his shoulder and takes the water from you. Your fingers slippery and cold against his hot, dirty ones as he takes the glass from you slowly.

"Original, huh?" he asks, his tone full of smugness.

"Yeah. That means I thought of it myself." you explain in a condescending, mocking tone, even though you both know you didn't misunderstand him.

"So you been thinking up lumberjack pick up lines all morning?" he raises an eyebrow at you and your blush would've been noticeable if you weren't already flushed and sticky from the heat. He switches beverages in your hands, taking a long drink of the beer.

"I mean...I could lie and say no." you say, a laugh threatening to erupt from you while you speak. He stops drinking and laughs into the can. He downs the rest, handing it to you. "Is that not what you've been thinking about out here all day?" you tilt your head, shrugging. "Because that's what I'd be doing." you say enthusiastically, laughing out loud this time.

"That's not what's been on my mind today but," he shrugs casually. "It did cross it." he says with an entirely too charming grin. The length of the silence between the sentences was ripe with flirtatious expressions passing over faces. "If you think of any more...let me know." he grins, stuffing the towel into the back pocket of your shorts. It's hard to keep your jaw from dropping at his nerve as he leans in close to you, reaching around your back to do this, completely invading your personal space. You kept your eyes on each other as he moved in, ending with you giving him a side-eye he was so close. He slowly pulls away, and thankfully not too fast before you can smell the scent of sweat, sunshine, grass, and wood on him. If you could bottle that smell, you'd be a millionaire.

You turn to leave, giving him a slight nod before you head off.

"Thanks, sweetheart." he says, one hand back on the ax already, the other, smacking the towel in the back pocket of your shorts. You've created a monster. You weren't sure if you were worried or proud.

"You're incorrigible." you scold with a smirk and a playful wink as you head back inside.

His shoulders shake at your response. His hands gripping the ax handle again as he bit his lip watching you swing away in those shorts and that thin tank top. The heat was getting to him.

You're staring again. Your elbows are on the counter and you're sneakily watching him.

"Why's Hop here? His car's out front." Joyce says walking into the kitchen your whole body jumps because you didn't hear her come in. You stand and put your hands on the counter, exhaling harshly.
"I didn't mean to scare you." she laughs, putting a hand on your back. "What's got you so distracted?" she asks concerned.

You shake your head and make a pitiful whine of a noise and motion to Hopper in the backyard as you hang your head.

Joyce's head falls back into a big laugh, she covers her mouth as soon as she hears the volume of it. "Well that's..." she chuckles to herself as you both sit with your elbows on the window, watching him. "This is straight out of your diary, isn't it? The classic Lumberjack scenario." she snorts and you grin at her little scrunched up face.

"I'm gonna have to write into Penthouse with this bullshit." you bite your bottom lip "I mean, sweet Jesus, look at him," you say angrily, you emphasize with wide eyes. "I want to punch him in his dumb good lookin' face for doing this to me." you let out a dramatic, frustrated sigh.

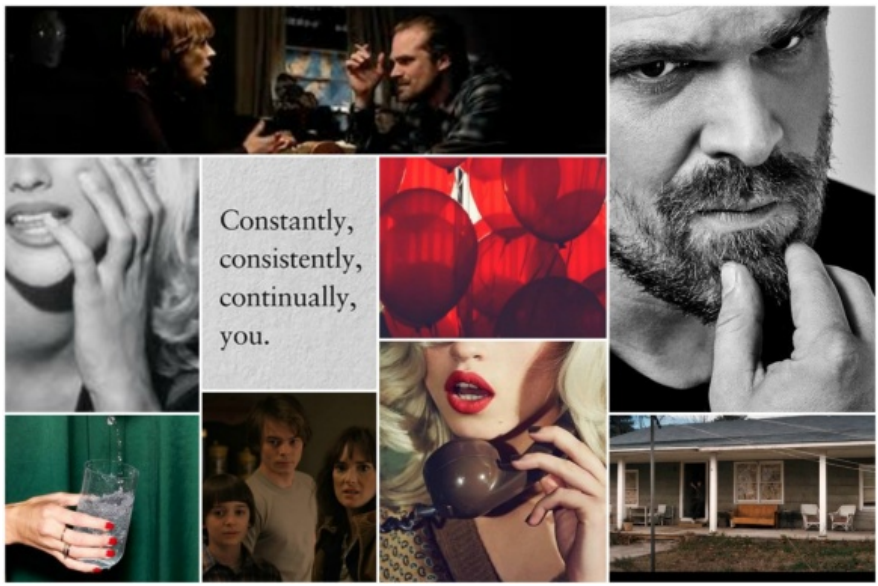
"I mean, this isn't precisely right out of my diary but..." she chuckles and elbows you. "I mean, I definitely get it." she covers her mouth as she laughs.

"He could get it." you laugh out loud, your whole torso shaking from your bad joke.

"You were always the one that liked those big 'ol boys." she raises back to her hands on the counter.

"I like big 'ol strong men now." you purse out your lips. "And that right there is a hell of a specimen." Joyce smirks at you as she sees the glazed, dreamy look in your eyes. She wonders when you'll realize you're starting to be more than just attracted to him physically. Even though it was certainly progress that you were admitting that attraction out loud, even to her.

6. Birthdays & Anniversaries



August

As he pushes through the double doors of The Hideaway much, much later than he expected to, he eyes Joyce with a nod at a booth and slides in across from her.

"I was wondering if you were gonna show up." she raises her eyebrow at him.

"I got held up, I know. I don't need to get worked by you, I feel bad enough as it is." he mumbles the last part and Joyce uncrosses her arms.

"Well, you've missed sober Ann. But drunk Annie is on the floor if you want to go say hi to her." she gives a subtle smirk to Hopper who narrows his eyes at her.

"I figured I was too late for sober Annie." he sighs.

"She did wait for you, she did that thing where she thinks she isn't obviously pouting but she is. She just wanted to get drunk and dance with Ted after she gave up on waiting for you." Joyce wears that same scolding look.

"Ted?" he says in an angry whisper.

"Teddy? Her friend from California? I know you remember that nights conversation." she says low. His mouth pulls into a tight line.

"Right." he says flatly, looking for you in the small crowd. He sees you walking from the back hallway, it's like you zero in on him immediately and he's taken off guard by your reaction.

Your face lights up like it's Christmas morning. You squeak out an enthusiastic "Hopper!" and saunter over to him in your high heels. He stands as you approach and you wrap your arms around his neck and squeeze. He's caught off guard by how close your faces are together. You're just shy of 6 feet tall in the heels you're wearing. This was something new for him. "I didn't know if you were gonna make it." you whine slightly, speaking quietly and closely to him. Your hands rest on his collarbone, your fingers touching the collar of his shirt. He can smell the strong cherry scent of your lipgloss, your face is so close to his, and you seem so comfortable with this fact.

"I know, I'm sorry. I got caught up and-" you shush him and put your fingers over his mouth, your fingers moving too slowly down across the dense hair.

"Shut up. You're here now." you hug him tightly again and he can't help but laugh at your affection this time, looking down to Joyce who is thoroughly amused by the interaction, wearing an 'I told you so' expression. You loudly sigh, loving how easily you could hold him when you wore heels. It'd certainly be easier to kiss him. "Would you be a doll and get me some water?" you ask, scrunching your nose up and pushing your chest against him. You'd missed him a lot tonight. You'd had fun but it felt a little empty thinking he'd broken his promise to come to out for your birthday.

When he comes back your in the booth, you're leaning forward on the table talking enthusiastically to your sister who, bless her heart, is acting interested. As his view of the booth widens, he see's a man sitting against the wall, his body turned towards yours, his elbow on the table, his head leaning on it as he watches you speak.

You see him walking back towards you. Your hands clasped together in front of you on the table, where your elbows are rested on it, your legs underneath you in the seat. He swears you bat your eyelashes and your shoulders slump with a sigh as he gets closer to you.

You hum happily as you see him bringing you your drink. Your head tilts as he sits next to Joyce, now in front of you, you scrunch your nose in adoration as he slides the glass into your hand.

"There ya go, sweetheart." he mumbles.

"Thanks, sweetheart." you giggle back at him. Taking a long drink. You set the glass back down with a smack of your lips. Ted knocks his hand against your shoulder.

"You gonna be rude or you gonna introduce me?" his deep laugh sounds so much better in person than over the phone.

"Both." you snark back. "Jim, this is Ted." you motion to your friend to your right. "Ted, this is Jim." you motion your hand to Jim. They give each other the polite nod, acknowledging the other.

"I've heard a lot about you, Jim," Teddy says, you jab your elbow into his ribs. He rubs his side and laughs. "Nice to finally put a face to the name."

"Good to meet you too." he says gruffly, giving him another nod.

"I met Teddy when I first moved to California." you explain, your chin in your hands, looking over at your long-distance best friend. "We met at a bar and started dancing and just, kinda never stopped." he reaches out and rubs your shoulder slightly, sharing your show of affection. "I basically begged him to come here for my birthday." you scrunch your nose at him, "I've missed going out and dancing." you sigh out. Your eyes swing back over to Jim, your movement

exaggerated by your blood alcohol content. What you really wanted was to dance with him tonight. You held out hope but you weren't holding your breath.

"That's only mostly true." his broad shoulders shake with laughter, his dark eyes closing. "I might've missed your big, loud, drunk dancing ass." he raises an eyebrow at you as you grin.

Jim tenses at the other man's words. Only he got to talk to you like that.

"Her ability to verbally threaten has improved since I saw her last, to her credit." he ruffles your hair and the giggle you emit Jim has never heard before.

He didn't think the guy's deep voice matched his appearance. He thought he lacked a certain roughness around the edges that he'd assumed was your type, but what did he know. As you lean back into the other man's chest, chatting animatedly with your hands as if laying on him like that was the most natural thing for you like you'd done it a hundred times before. Joyce notices the tightness in Jim's jaw and the corner of her mouth draws back with a smug smile as she see's his body language as you carry on with your touchy-feeling drunken notions.

Your hands clap together as the beginning of "Do You Love Me" starts. You shoot up out of the booth surprisingly gracefully for as much as you'd drank. "C'mon Teddy Bear!" you say enthusiastically and leaning into the booth for his wrist and you pull him towards the jukebox. "I've still got some dancing left in me tonight." you giggle at Jim and Joyce as you swing around and start bopping to the dance floor.

Ted gives them both a nod, "Duty calls." he says sarcastically as his much larger than your's frame sways behind you.

Jim sits his glass back down on the table much harder than he meant to after taking a swig. He's busy brooding and pretending he's not.

"She'd dance with you like that if you'd go ask." Joyce says, teasing him.

"Hell, I probably can't keep up with her. Look at her." he sighs, his shoulders falling slightly. You're doing some bastardized version of the twist, your hips possibly giving away far too much about what you might be like in bed. He shakes the thought out of his head.

"Yeah, they've been doing this all night. Ted's a hell of a dancer." Joyce sighs. Jim looks over at her with a glare. She looks up at her dear friend with a shake of her head and laughs at him.

"Oh, Hop." she says, rubbing his shoulder, continuing to laugh. "You used to be a hell of a dancer if I recall correctly," she says trying to raise his confidence.

"You do recall correctly." he takes another drink, his tone obvious.

"Right. It's her birthday, Hop, give the poor girl what she wants." she laughs quietly, motioning her hand to you.

"I don't know that Ted would appreciate that." he says, sucking his teeth and looking away from your swinging form.

"I really don't think he'd mind at all." Joyce shakes her head. Jim looks at her slightly confused. Beast of Burden comes over the jukebox, he hears your enthusiastic response to the opening chords and makes the mistake of looking back over to the sound. If he thought your body was distracting during a fast song, it was downright torture to watch during a slow song.

"What a beautiful mess my baby sister is." Her eyes big with her love for you in them. "I was always jealous of how easily she could act like no one else was around in public like that." her lips purse together in thought. "How she can live in the moment, just acting and not over thinking everything." she lets out a sigh.

"She's....she is something." he whispers back, taking another drink.

Joyce had left. You'd just left with Ted. He hadn't asked you to dance. He'd regret that decision after seeing the way you'd looked at him as you walked away from him through the windows of the bar. He sat inside and watched you go, and as Ted's arm swung over your shoulders, he could see it in your eyes, it hit him so hard he swore he

could taste your disappointment in him tonight.

August

You're on the phone with Ted again, he's checking in after getting home, filling you in on his trip. You're sitting cross-legged on Joyce's bed as you hear Jim's Blazer pull up and the front door open. You start to wind Ted's story down to join him and Joyce.

Jim and Joyce both sit at the table waiting on you, the usual way things panned out when you'd made them both come and play cards together.

He sits and stares at the wall, chewing on his cheek. His expression is fairly blank but Joyce knows better. His leg is bouncing under the table. She lets out a loud sigh and puts an elbow on the table, her voice hushed so you can't hear her.

"Jim?" she asks, her hand on his forearm to get his attention. He looks at her hand first, then to her, his eyebrows raise in response.
"You're killing me with this pouting." she says, exasperated, shaking her head.

"Pouting?" he says offended, huffing out a scoff as he rolls his eyes, taking a drag from his cigarette, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes, pouting. It's no longer endearing so please, just tell me what's wrong." she insists, moving her hand away from him, it meeting her other on the top of the table.

"Nothin'." he says low, still being defensive.

"Ugh." Joyce says, frowning at him. "Fine, we'll do this the hard way." she reaches out and slides his drink away and take his cigarette out of his hand, holding it out of his reach.

"Hey!" he says surprised, swiping a paw at her to reach his vices.

"Hopper. What happened after I left the bar?" she asks, her voice still calm and quiet and all knowing. Her usual tone for him.

"Nothing. Nothing happened." he says annoyed, the backs of his hands hitting the table in defeat.

"Don't make me call you a liar, Jim Hopper." she raises her eyebrows to scold him. Still holding his cigarette as far as possible, her arm still outstretched.

"Fine." he says angrily. He leans in on his elbows closer to her to speak softly. She brings her arm back to the table, handing him his cigarette. He motions for the beer can and she shakes her head.

"You'll get it after you tell me." she patronizes him, nodding her head. He rolls his eyes and continues.

"She left with Ted. They went back to his hotel together. I didn't ask her dance." he says it all so flatly, not looking into her eyes. "There," he says a bit louder. "Happy now?"

"I knew it. Jealous." she grins at him.

"I'm not..." he sighs in annoyance. "I'm not fuckin' jealous." he mumbles.

Joyce holds in her laughter at his childish behavior, it manifests itself as a snort. "You're jealous of Ted." she lets out a loud sigh, her chin resting on one hand. "Oh Hop." she shakes her head.

"Don't patronize me." he groans.

"I'm not. Oh come on, you're not that damn dense." she gives his arm a slight shove with her free hand. "If I'd known that was what was bothering you I could've fixed this whole," she moves her hand to motion up and down at him, "mood you've been in before it even started." she sighs at him again. His brow furrows at her.

"What are you talking about?" he asks, eyes narrowed, head hung low and shaking in ever growing annoyance for this line of conversation.

"She stayed at his place because she had to see him off so early in the morning for him to drive back home." she whispers almost aggressively at him. "Also, and more importantly..." she lets it hang in the air for a moment, "Ted's gay." she says, her hand splayed out to

display to the invisible answer to his problems right in front of him. She relishes the look on his face, to see the confusing relief wash over him. As soon as it hits him, he flushes in embarrassment. Embarrassment turns into anger for a moment.

"And you couldn't have mentioned that the first night you told me who he was?" he almost spits at her.

"I didn't think it was important. They're friends, she said they were friends right in front of you. Even I told you. You think I would've said what I did that night if I knew, or even thought she had some, long-distance boyfriend or something?" she scolds him for his using that tone with her. His mouth moves into a tight line at her words because she's right.

"Still..." he says in his defense, his voice softer, less intense. "That might've...helped with digesting that conversation." he says, his eyes going wide for a moment to display how he still felt embarrassed and hesitant.

"Well, you never said it was bothering you. Now did you?" she scolds less intensely this time, but still raises an eyebrow at him as he reluctantly swings his eyes over to her.

"No." he admits with a moody inflection.

She slides his drink back over to him. "Now that wasn't so bad, was it?" she smiles, patting his arm. Now she was patronizing. She's sitting and smirking, he's rubbing his chin in thought as you slide into the seat next to him.

"We playin' Hearts?" you ask enthusiastically, the weird mood in the room hits you as you move to shuffle the cards.

"Of course we are." Joyce gives you a sweet scrunch-faced smile from across the table.

"It is your favorite." Jim says, giving you a strangely sad half smile. You almost pout at his expression but give him a similar expression back instead.

"It is." you hum happily, smiling brightly, trying to charm the sadness

out of him.

September

This had been the first time you'd had to take Will to one of his doctor appointments alone at the lab. You'd seen him in other doctors offices, traveling with Joyce in tow to specialists, but this had felt different. The building, the doctors, the tests, everything about that place felt wrong to you. You, of course, suffered silently, being nothing but supportive, possibly too much so at times for Will.
But now Joyce was curled up with him in his bed. Having experienced an episode recently, she couldn't stand to be apart from him any longer the moment she'd come in from work. You were left with pity filled looks from Jonathan as you sat in the dimly lit kitchen, your worry and raw nature worn on your face and in your body language without any filter.

Jonathan rolls in before he goes to sleep for the night. He shakes your shoulder and your head shoots up from the kitchen table, you hurriedly wipe at your face.

"It's okay," he says quietly. "I just couldn't let you sleep like this all night. You should go to bed." he pats your shoulder and shuffles off to his room.

You groan as you hear his door click shut, You were so tired. You hadn't slept well since his most recent episode. With the anniversary looming and already feeling on edge from it, it made all these bad feelings even worse. You couldn't talk to Joyce or the kids about it, and that made it hurt more. Then you remember his words. "If it gets worse. You call me." You sigh and wipe your eyes. He did mean that right? Not in a polite sense, but meant he would be there if you needed him. You groan and realize you needed him, you felt your heart might explode if you had to spend another night with these anxieties unspoken. So you call him. You realize in the moments that you dial, wait, and listen to the ring, that you are doing the opposite of running right now and you can't help but feel a twinge of pride in yourself.

"Hey Jim." you sigh out, your hand and forehead on the wall of the kitchen. You speak just above a whisper after his reluctant greeting.

"Ann?" his voice is higher pitched immediately. "What happened?" he immediately assumes the worst and you huff a small laugh into the receiver, finding the reaction reassuring.

"Nothing happened. Everyone else is in bed." you say in a more casual tone than you feel.

"Oh." you can hear the relief in his voice.

"You said I could call if it got worse, right?" you say, trying to find a way into asking for what you wanted.

You hear his breathing change slightly. "Of course, but you said..." he trails off slightly towards the end, making it seem like more of a question than a statement. "What's worse?" he asks sincerely.

You try not to sigh directly into the mouthpiece but you're pretty sure it was still close enough for him to hear the groan that followed. You roll to rest the back of your head and shoulders on the wall instead. "Me." you say quietly, looking down the hallway in anticipation someone would emerge.

"Ann, what's wrong?" his voice lowers to match your own.

"I hesitated to call because it's not exactly an emergency but-" you lick your lips, pausing to collect your thoughts. "I can't talk to Joyce or the boys about this because it's about them and that leaves you, I'm afraid," you say wistfully. "I just needed-" you say much whinier than you meant to come across, you clear your throat to try again.

"I'll come over." he interrupts. There's no annoyance, no sighing to be heard. In fact, you think you hear him moving already. Your hand moves to cover your stomach to express how touched you are by the knee-jerk response he just had.

"You don't ha-"

"I'm already leaving." he says sternly into the phone as he hangs it up. You turn back to the phone after you hang it up. You look around the

kitchen. Shocked at the reaction he'd had. You couldn't be more happy to have gotten out of asking for him to come over, which is what you'd wanted. You had to have some empathy from someone else who had to go through what you all had. Jim was the best option.

You sit on the porch as you watch him drive down the road to the driveway. You start hitting your pack of cigarettes against your hand as he switches off the lights of the Blazer, knowing he'll start smoking as soon as he got here if he hadn't started already. He's in his street clothes. He looks big enough to blot out the moon as he stands in front of you, looking down at you. He gives you a raise of his eyebrows as he holds out his hand to help you up. You politely decline.

"Everyone's asleep, I'd like to just sit out here if that's fine." you say quietly, squinting up at him. "It's not that cold." you mumble to justify your decision further.

"Yeah, that's fine." he says as he moves and sits next to you, his long legs bent as you both sit on the slightly raised platform of the porch. His eyes float around the surroundings for a moment as you light a cigarette, your knee pulled up close to your chest, the other lazily laying bent. He sits patiently, his body language relaxed despite the already slightly bent brow his expression holds. "The anniversary coming up bothering you too, huh?" he asks, his face up towards the sky.

"Yeah." you sigh out, resting your head on your arm, on top of your knee as you look over at him. "That doctor appointment today shook me up for some reason." your voice still light, even though you're outside you still don't want to be overheard.

"I get that." he nods in agreement, looking down at you over his shoulder.

"I hate that place." you whisper.

"Yeah, me too, kid." he says, sighing with you, patting your back.

"I can't talk to them," you motion behind you to your family, "about

them and my brain feels like it wants to shatter into pieces over everything while I'm feeling so on edge this close to a year." you start to grumble towards the end of your sentence. Your hands had moved up involuntarily into a claw-like shape as you began to explain your emotions. Your eyes wilder and wetter than you realized, the sight of you so vulnerable and visibly hurting made his chest hurt.

"Come here," he says, you lift your head in surprise as he extends his arm and wraps it around you as you scoot next to him, your sides touching, he squeezes you int him, your head rests on his chest. "The anniversaries are always worse." he explains. You let out a sigh at how nice it was to be physically and verbally comforted like this. Especially by someone who wasn't bound to you by blood, and therefore in no way was expected or required to care about your feelings at all. But here he was. You hadn't really even had to ask.

"I know." you nod, sniffling slightly, your fingers rubbing your nose. "I keep feeling like I'm waiting on something else bad to happen all the time." you admit, slumping into him slightly.

"We just have to get through the next few weeks." he says into your hair, planting a kiss on your head. "It'll get better." he promises.

7. Memories & Monologues

Summary for the Chapter:

> I'm tweaking their reality here, I know. But this fan fiction, so...I can do that.
> (Fun side note. This is the first piece I wrote for this series. This moment was what played in my head for months before I let myself write it and inspired the entire story. This is not the end by a long shot so...I hope you enjoy it.)

Memories

One night after being "grounded" but still getting wasted in your room you find Hopper outside alone. You were in your pajamas, which happened to be ones you'd worn before you hit puberty, so at this point, a robe would've been appropriate to have worn over it if you're getting out of bed. But at your level of sobriety in combination with your naive, aloof mind, you went outside in it anyway. You can't remember why you had gone outside, or why he was there too, but you were a drunk teenager and that felt like a lifetime ago. You do remember he was upset about something. But mostly you remember that the look on his face when he became distracted and flustered at your body made you feel things. So naturally, in your drunken, pathetic rebellion you said something inappropriate. Neither of you said much to each other after that night for a while. Your crush, however, remained, if not worsened through your denial of it. Your young, naive heart thought you loved him.

Then Joyce got pregnant. It crashed your outlook, it made you feel scared for her, for your relationship as sisters which had become strained as you tried to force everyone away from you. You saw her with Lonnie. You hated Lonnie. You and Hopper both loathed him. This was something you instantly bonded over. You'd seen the way he looked at him, it was how you looked at him too. Like he was taking something that belonged to you. You started being able to hold conversations alone together again. You weren't the same girl you were the last time you'd been close though. Because after Joyce got pregnant and you saw the life she had now you wanted to run

scared. You wanted out of Hawkins. You felt caged and didn't want what happened to her to happen to you. This would be a theme that would follow you around your entire adult life up until you hear about Will going missing.

You'd thought the reason Hop stayed around so long after Joyce got pregnant was because of how much he loved her. He wanted to leave after he found out, he found it hell to deal with, but he saw how you reacted to the news. He knew Joyce wouldn't be able to handle you anymore with a baby and an abusive husband. He didn't want you to get hurt in the wake of the consequences of Joyce's bad decisions. He felt compelled to stay and make sure you didn't get in too much trouble because he saw your life going that way unless someone was there to look after you. Once he thought you had matured enough, which happened surprisingly quickly, he found after he started trying to correct your behavior, he felt he could leave without the weight of it on his shoulders. Very shortly after he left, you did too.

NOVEMBER

Sure you'd not been the best aunt. You had come to holidays when you weren't too far away to make it. You sent cards and called for birthdays and celebrations when you remembered. Sure you hadn't been as close as you wanted to be to your family, but every time you'd tried to settle down for yourself or with them, you got itchy and ran. You loved them, deeply and dearly you had just let yourself forget how to show and say that.

And all that brought you here. To this moment. This was how you would show them how much they meant to you. To Joyce, to your nephews, to Hopper.

"Why are you doing this?" he says slowly, his emotions in his eyes, his voice cracked. Shutting the door to the room across the hall he'd dragged you into without asking you first. He'd just grabbed you and moved.

"Because besides you, I'm the only one that can." you say matter-of-factly.

"Did you ever think they don't want you to do this? That I don't want you to do this?" his voice is hushed, he bares his teeth when he speaks to you unintentionally. How was he supposed to keep control when you kept breaking his heart like this.

"I have to." you say through gritted teeth, standing and wiping your face.

"Jesus, Ann! No, you don't!" his hands raise in the air in frustration. His nails digging into his palms as he tries to stay quiet and alert while also having this loaded conversation.

"If you think for one second, that I would even hesitate to die for them," you stutter, his shoulders wincing at your words. "then you clearly don't know me as well as you think you do, Jim." the tears sting your eyes, your stomach knots and you hold back.

His head falls down, he closes his eyes.

"You aren't the only one allowed to go and put yourself in danger you know," you growl at him, your hands planted on your hips, still mad about you and Joyce having to save him from his own recklessness in the tunnels.

He turns back to you, his hands on your shoulders, he takes a deep breath, "You know chances are you don't make it back, right?" he's never looked this intensely at you. You pull your mouth into a tight line so your lips don't tremble. A wave of nausea hits you.

"I know," you whisper, tears cresting out of your eyes and slowly rolling down your cheek. "It's worth it if you get them out of here." your voice cracks, you're having a hard time keeping all this in. He pulls you into his arms. You feel his face on the top of your head. "Promise me you'll get them out of here." your hands hold on tightly to his shirt, you close your eyes and rest your face against him.

"I promise." his voice was more somber, you feel a breath hitch in his chest.

You push away from him, wiping your eyes with the sleeve of your shirt. You and Jim share a weighted moment, just looking at each

other. Neither of you had the words right now.

You reach to the doorknob and open the door after he moves out of the way to let you out. You look up and see Joyce standing there, her arms crossed, she's sobbing and practically leaps into your arms, this was going to be ugly.

He stands next to you while he helps secure everything on you, his face is hard and he hasn't said much. He put your earpiece in, checks the gun before handing it to you, and tightens the strap onto your shoulder. The rhythmic pulsing of the alarm light is the only illumination in the dark stairwell. This'll be the last time you see him. You'd said your goodbyes to everyone but him really. Well, the things you really wanted to say to him anyway.

"I know you're mad. I'm sorry." your eyes follow him as he continues not engaging with you, as he checks you over again. "As cliche, as it is I want you all to try to not feel bad too long." you grab his hands and shake them until he looks at you. He meets your gaze from where he'd held it at the ceiling. "At least leave me with the illusion that you'll try to be happy again." you frown and sigh.

"Alright. You're good to go." he motions to your gear with his head. You see he wasn't going to be honest unless you made a grand, sweeping gesture first. You grumble and take off the gun, he looks at you, confusion on his face.

"Give me your shirt, Jim." you hold your hand out, your shoulders low, your voice already tired.

"Why?" he shakes his head at you.

"Just give it to me." you groan. His eyes narrow at you, he takes off the flannel shirt layer. You walk over the glass panel still intact on the nearest door and you slip on the shirt. At first, you button a few buttons, admiring your reflection in the glass. Then you roll up the sleeves, and tie it at the waist and put your gun back on.

"That's just gonna slow you down, you know that. It'll get caught on something or grabbed or-"

"Shut up, Jim." you put your hands on his arms, your eyes tired.

"Look, I want you to come back, I know it's not realistic but I have to hold onto that as long as I can to deal with this. So if I let you go in that, I know it'll be my fault if it's what gets you killed and I can't have that added on top of everything else." it comes tumbling out of him, his shoulders falling as his words continued on. You were left with Jim. Class of '60 Jim. The golden boy of your teen years. You saw the same eyes, the same look on his face when he was truly exhausted.

"Can't you just let a girl die in your shirt, Jim? Jesus." you roll your eyes and let go of him, moving to the strap on your shoulder.

"Wait." he grabs your arm. "What?" his brow is bent but not angry.

"You really wanna know right now?" you raise your eyebrows at him with an annoyed attitude.

"Fuck. Well, I have to now that you said that." you almost smile.

"I didn't want to die not knowing what I looked like in one of your shirts." you admit much more easily than you thought. Your eyes move from side to side at your own surprise to the admission. You say it calmly, returning your eyes to his face after having no better way to share this information with him.

He goes through lots of expressions on a micro level, his eyes mostly read of surprise.

"Jim..." you chew the inside of your cheek, taking a big breath in. You decide to not hold back in the last moments you'd have here with him. You put your hands on the sides of his face and stare into his eyes.

You wouldn't have believed it if your older self could've told your younger self that your so-called first love would get even more handsome the older he got. The way his eyes crinkled and his cheeks folded as he smiled. The beard he'd be thrilled to have known he could grow eventually had come in. He grew even taller somehow, broader, stronger. You adored the soft middle he'd accumulated, you

thought it matched his insides better than the rest of his rough outer appearance. You weren't completely sure if you wanted to be with him, you had thought you might over the past year. You didn't know if there was some happy ending for you two, probably not, especially not together. But you did know you loved him. Not just the smidge of romantic love that refused to leave your heart, left over from your teen years. But a fully thought out mutual respect that grew the more he revealed about himself. He was good, you'd known very few good men in your life and he deserved to be loved.

"There are so many things I'd love to tell you. I'll tell you next time I see you, okay?" you smile at him, genuinely.

"Annie..." he whispers, his face falling, he swallows hard as he holds in tears. You let him say your childhood name without rejection. But it doesn't come without its pain.

"But in the meantime, know I find it very fitting that you're the one here with me for this. I wouldn't want anyone else here with me right now." the corner of your mouth pulls back into a sad and reluctant smile. You let go of his face and sigh at him, taking it in one last time.

"Not even Joyce?" his voice is soft and quiet. You're surprised by his response.

"No. I don't need her for this. I need you." your voice is calm and confident.

He repeats your name. He grabs your face and his mouth opens, you never thought you'd live to see Jim Hopper's lips trembling at your expense. A few tears fall down your face as he moves in close to you.
"Please, don't go." he hoarsely whispers. He couldn't help but feel the irony of his words, as you'd asked the same thing of him when he told you he was leaving Hawkins decades before. You squeeze your eyes shut at the sound of his voice, it's painful. He keeps saying your name and each time it hurts more than the last.

"I'm going to be a pain in the ass until the end. Especially yours. Same as it's always been." you put one of your hands over his.

"I'm sorry." you feel him shake his head as he squeezes you again. "For everything. For when you were younger and now. I'm sorry you were drawn into this. You don't deserve this." he rushes out his apology, you feel his breath tinging across your scalp.

"But I do deserve it." you sigh, you felt it was true, deep down.

"Don't say that." he says into your hair. "You are," he composes himself for a moment, "You are a pain in the ass." he lets out a huff of a laugh and you follow. "But you're also irreplaceable. I know you don't see how important you are but that doesn't change that fact." you could hear the anger bubbling under the surface of his kind words. "I really wanted better for you, sweetheart, I'm so sorry I couldn't do that."

"I gave up on trying to hold things against you a very long time ago, Jim." you give him a tight-lipped smile. "I forgive you for whatever you've made up in your head to be guilty about. None of this is on you." you shake your head at him. You start to pull back and he brings your lips together. Sharing a few slow movements before parting. At least you could die without wondering what his lips felt like against yours now. You sniffle as he pulls away, neither of you could tell who started crying first because both your faces were wet. You try to quiet your loud breathing, slow your chest trying to panic, your heart wanting to explode from the overload of emotions.

You stretch and crack your joints, taking many deep breaths, you stand at the edge of the stairs. You look down into the darkness. You put your hands around the large gun, and close your eyes. You feel Jim standing very close to you.

"Please. Don't do anything stupid. Try to come back to us." he pushes his forehead against the side of your head.

"I always find my way back to you, don't I? Whether I mean to or not it seems." you don't look at him, your heart is beating too fast to handle any more surging emotions.

He doesn't respond. He squeezes your hand and kisses your hair again.

"Maybe we'll get this right in the next lifetime." one hand rests on your chest to steady your heartbeat. It stays because you feel like it's the weakest part of you right now, on the edge of bursting and breaking. "I'm glad we had the chance to be friends again. No matter what you'll tell yourself later, I'm okay with this ending." you want to clarify, you could only imagine the years of his life he'll spend carrying the guilt of your death on his shoulders, even though he shouldn't. You turn your face to look into his eyes. "I love ya, Jim." you say with a slump of your shoulders. It felt so good to say it. You wished you'd had time to sit and live in the feeling of relief, but you didn't.

"I love you too, Annie." His face softens as the words fall past his lips. "Too bad we couldn't have said it more often." his face screws up slightly. You nod and give him one last kiss.

He backs away and stands in the doorway to the stairwell. Your lips quiver and you clear your throat and squeeze your eyelids shut to clear your eyes of tears. You couldn't kill these things if you let your eyes blur. Time to tap into your muscle memory. You take the first step down the stairs.

Jim hears you humming softly to yourself as you head down the stairs, your steps a beat to your favorite song. He slowly backs away, trying to recall the tune, it was so familiar. He thinks he recognizes the song as your voice drifts too far from his ears to hear and he goes back to the surveillance room.

"It's getting a little crowded up here so we're going to have to take this slow." Dr. Owens voice carries over the walkie-talkie you have in one hand, the gun in the other. Your eyes are wide, your heart pounding in your chest. Your ears try to pick up every possible sound and its cause around you. The buzz of the overhead fluorescent lights was deafening.

You start walking. You try to control your breathing. Heel, toe, heel, toe you move down the echoing hallways. You follow his instructions. You do everything you're supposed to but that didn't mean anything in this scenario. You hide around corners, in closets, you hold your breath and try to focus. It all happens so fast.

"RUN!" you hear over the walkie-talkie, your eyes land on one of the monsters. As your heart drops into your stomach and you push with all your strength against the floor. Your feet hit the tile in fast pats that mimic the rising rate of your heart.

You break through another set of doors. You see the front lobby, you hear your sister.

"ANNIE!" she screams. You feel the whoosh of air as the monsters break down the doors right behind you. You only lock eyes for a second with Joyce. You lunge out of the way and you hear her scream. You see Jim aiming the gun and your heart is beating so fast you make desperate noises with every movement you make, pushing your body to work as hard and fast as it can. You scurry across the floor, losing your walkie-talkie in the struggle. You see at least 5 more of the creatures moving together out of the bursting door. You make your way to the nearest clear doorway, pushing through them without looking back.

You hear Joyce screaming incoherently, gunfire, the sounds of the monsters growling and scurrying across the floor, more gunfire. When you hear the wood of the door you'd just ran through from the lobby split and crack, then you hear Jim scream. You involuntarily join them as you make your way blindly through the maze of hallways. You hear snarls and scratches coming from everywhere. You're dodging bloody bodies as you jump and slide your way farther and farther from the exit.

You see the metal door crumpled up against a wall, you dart into the room without thinking. You see the lift, you know it goes somewhere, you don't care where right now, you slam it shut and push the buttons and groan at how slow time is passing. As it lowers into the darkness, you hold the side of the basket, gasping for air, feeling your entire body shake with adrenaline and fear. A few hard sobs convulse your body as you descend. As you land you're grasping your gun again. You look around. It's quiet, you don't trust it. You feel air blowing on your neck and you turn to see dimly tunnels behind you. Your eyes adjust fully, seeing the cavernous expanse of the tunnels like Jim had been in when you and Joyce had saved him. The uneven pulsing floor underneath your feet made you stumble slightly. You didn't know why there weren't any of those things here, it didn't

make any sense. You know this is your last chance to get out, you huff a determined noise and pick a tunnel to follow.

The metaphorical smoke had cleared, everyone was settled down and safe. The sun was coming up, the roadway illuminated enough now for the street lamps to turn off in town.

Jim was driving back to the cabin alone, he needed to be for a little while after all of this. At least long enough to shower and eat something so his body could have a chance at functioning. He wasn't sure when the crying would try to sneak it's way out. He's rounding a curve on the way to the cabin. He thinks he sees someone walking on the side of the road, he assumes it's a jogger, it's dawn after all. The closer he gets, the more his heartbeat races. The thought crosses his mind that it was a hallucination. He remembered doing that after Sarah died, so he didn't trust himself after losing you too. Not after the hellish night he'd just survived. His heart drops when he sees dark hair, but he knows it's not a jogger when he sees the blood-soaked clothes.

His heart chokes him in his throat. The sun hits your hair, he sees it shine red. Your hair was so covered in blood it looked as dark as Joyce's. His eyes are wide as the gravel sprays and he pulls the Blazer up behind your bent form. He barrels out of the vehicle, screaming out your name.

You barely register the sound. You aren't sure if it's dawn or dusk or where you are. You had pieced together your brain enough to know you should find and follow a road for help. You need a hospital but you can't think about that, you're still in shock. You see the gash in your thigh and arm, puncture wounds in clusters across the rest of your body, you know there's blood soaked into your clothes, not all of it yours. If what those things even had in them would be considered blood. You use a branch to help you walk, you're worried you're cut too deeply on your leg. Your hair is damp to the touch from any number of wet mucus sources drying in the cool air. You hear the gravel crunch behind you and try to turn to whatever was waiting for you there.

"Annie?" your ears pick up. You watch as he gets slightly fuzzy as he shakes you in a panic by your arms, screaming your name. "Jesus, sweetheart, what'd they do to you?" he asks, his hands looking over your injuries, he winces at the sight of you and goes to pick you up and carry you to the vehicle.

Your tired body lashes out at him as you flashback to what you'd just been through as his big arms trap your body. You drop the crutch in the process and fall into his arms, not being able to support yourself. You try to focus on him, he's holding your face in his big, warm hand, not even registering your blows. "Annie, it's me." his voice is a welcome sound, even if it does come out scratchy and desperate. You lock eyes and he finally registers in your brain.

"Jim?" you choke out, tears starting to fall from your eyes. Your lips hurt very badly as you spoke. "Are you real?" you ask him, it was a genuine question. Your hand weakly reaches up to his face, you fall short and land on his collarbone. You wanted to touch him, make sure you weren't hallucinating from blood loss or already dead. You moan at the warmth radiating off his bare skin as you touched it. He seemed real.

He chokes back a sob of happiness and you know he is real by the sound. A dopey smile spreads across his face.

"Are you?" he laughs at you madly, not holding in the euphoric relief he felt at the sight of you. He readjusts you, holding you gently. "Come on I've got to get you to the hospital, baby." he says soothingly. "I'm going to pick you up, okay?" he asks, your eyes close and you nod, you go limp in his arms. You know he sits you in his car, you hear him start it. You flutter your eyes open and groan as the heat from the vents warms your cold, drained body.

"I didn't die." you muse weakly, your voice sounding amazed. You want to laugh but you cry out at the pain in your ribs.

"Somehow." You feel his warm hand touch you, you whimper at the feeling of warm again, you thought you'd never feel it again. You moan and lay against the door.

"Fuck. Everything hurts." you say in a breathy voice, using the arm

that you can move best to across your ribs. It's hard for him to watch the road, he can't believe you're real.

"I've got you, Annie, I'll fix it, just a little while longer." he rushes out in a hushed tone, trying to keep you calm. He's wondering if he died too somehow, because how could you have survived? "How in the hell did you do it, kid?" he mumbles to himself, seeing you passed out, wrapped in his coat.

8. Dusk & Dawn

NOVEMBER

You wake up in the hospital. You're grateful the blindingly bright lights weren't the afterlife you thought they might have been an indication of at first. You see you're covered in bandages and a cast on one arm. You find you can wiggle your fingers and toes and you relax, the beeping on the monitors slowing. You're surprised you're not in worse shape and more pain than you were. You groan at the hum of the lights and machines in your ears. You look around the room, you see Joyce on a love seat on the opposite of the room. You wonder how long you'd both been here.

"Joy." you croak out. Your voice is weak, your throat feels crushed.

You close your eyes and lay your head back, you can try again later. You have that option again.

JANUARY

You'd been so overwhelmed with recovery and the amount of love you felt coming at you from all sides from your family and friends. It gave you another crash course in dealing with compliments and intimacy. You'd needed this honestly, you just wish it hadn't been happening in the middle of healing and the holidays. It made everything whirl by so quickly you felt like you were going to miss something. You hadn't been able to help much at Thanksgiving and Christmas. You and Will shared too many long, empathetic looks over the Holidays as you both were now the target of attention you didn't really want or felt like you needed. Everyone treated you like you were fragile and incapable of anything. You'd both stared death in the face and come back so you'd think people would act more impressed instead of more worried than ever before.

So here you were, now just one arm out of commission, for the time being, trying to make snacks for tonight. You'd worked in kitchens before, you were perfectly capable of cooking a decent meal, but with one arm down and being out of practice it was proving harder than

you anticipated. Joyce was winding down her shift soon, Jonathan had taken out Will to give you the space you'd requested as you wanted to surprise them when they got home.

You're sitting in the living room, everyone is full of food and chattering on about the past year, bad memories are passed over as you focus on the good ones. Lots of sighs and watery eyes from you and your sister. Jonathan as stoic as usual, sharing glances with his brother, they would nudge each other with their hands and elbows often as they sassed each other after embarrassing stories were shared. The phone rings, it's very close to midnight and it makes all of you jump at the unexpectedness of it. Jonathan puts a hand on Joyce's knee out of instinct to calm her anxieties over the sound.

"I got it." he says, narrowing his eyes at the second ring. You can't make out the words from his quiet voice as he was out of sight. You smile over at Joyce, her eyes darting from the tv to you, an uneasy smile on her face.

"Probably a drunken wrong number." you scrunch your nose at her to ease her worried eyes. You see Jonathan appear around the wall and shake the phone your way.

"It's for you Ann." you tilt your head, the confused expression on your face clear. You shrug to Joyce who has a similar look on her face.

You walk to the phone and take it in the kitchen. You hold your hand over the receiver and with your upturned lip, you ask Jonathan who it is.

"It's Hopper." he says quietly, his eyebrows raise slightly at the suggestion of the intention of the call before he turns back into the living room.

"Jim?" you almost whisper, not wanting to worry Joyce with what news must be coming next.

"Happy New Year, Ann." he says quietly. Your mouth opens and your voice stutters.

"H-Happy New Year, Jim." you say in a suspicious voice, taken back

by the smooth tone of his voice. "It's not New Years yet, you're gonna make me miss it." you say sassily, leaning against the kitchen wall with your shoulder, peaking into the living room at the tv.

"I won't keep you long." he clears his throat. "I...I know I've not been around much since you've been out of the hospital." he sighs and trails off. "Well, I'm," A smile spreads across your face as you mindlessly wrap your finger in the long cord of the phone, your heart pumping faster as you hear the tone of his voice. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there tonight." he says, his voice low and sweet.

You let out a small feminine sound of amusement. "No apology necessary." you smirk and look up at the ceiling, "But without you here, my options for who to kiss at midnight are absolutely awful." you say in a hushed laugh, wanting to ease his worry about you. You'd missed the half-assed flirting, the goofiness you'd been working so hard to bring back into your lives until the Upside Down tore it all away again. You hear his laugh, the smacking of his lips against the receiver.

"I give you one kiss and now you're getting greedy?" he teases, his voice blooms into a laugh.

"If I recall correctly it was more than one, Jim." you tease back, your hand over your mouth as you quietly laugh into it so the others can't hear.

"And there might be more." he says, his voice full of grit and tease. The vagueness would usually annoy you but you were too relieved to know he was thinking about you to be annoyed.

"More?" you ask intrigued. You felt so much lighter knowing he'd entertained the possibility.

"I'd like to think so." he smartly answers. You peek around the wall again to look at your family, their faces illuminated by the tv light, huddled together. Your heart warms, making your chest feels heavy with gratitude.

"Promise?" you whisper, rolling back into the kitchen, fingers turning red and purple from the tight twist you'd unintentionally created

around them with the phone cord.

"Promise." he answers, his voice hitting you hard, making you swoon despite yourself.

9. Valentine & Variation

February

He sat in the Blazer, his hands gripping the steering wheel, leaning forward in the seat.

The traffic lights have been through a few cycles as he figures out what exactly he's doing here. Should he try to take you out for lunch? Was he just stopping by to check on you? He didn't really have a plan when he had pulled into the parking spot. Your words had been keeping him up at night and he couldn't shake the thought of you. He still didn't have any charming words in mind as he finally opens his car door. He just knew he felt like he needed to see you today, despite your previous claims to the day's unimportance to you. He clears his throat, one boot hitting the ground, he adjusts his hat on his head, slamming the door shut as he shoves his hands into his coat pockets, stepping up on the sidewalk to the record store you'd started working at.

The bell chimes as he enters, his head low, his eyes scanning the building for you. He doesn't see you and he frowns. He walks up to the owner behind the counter.

"Afternoon Chief, what can I help ya with?" he asks politely, looking up from his magazine.

"Is Annette working today?" he asks, his hand casually hitting the countertop.

"She finished her shift about an hour ago. She'll be here tomorrow though, you need me to leave her a message?" he asks moving to reach for a pen and paper.

"No, no. It's nothing urgent. Thanks." he looks around the store as he turns to leave disheartened. A pink album cover catches his eye in a display he's assuming you put together because of the choices that are shown. He furrows his brow, moving over to the shelf. He rubs his chin and sighs. He figured maybe a present would be a good idea today. It didn't begin to make up for his shortcomings lately but it

couldn't hurt. He hoped you didn't have this one already.

It's almost 8 o clock. You're floating around your apartment in your satin rob with fuzzy hems, living your Mae West fantasy. You'd been spending this day alone all boozy and floozy for years now. So you're eating fruit and drinking wine, indulging yourself. The radio is on and this is how you are celebrating your Valentine's Day. Joyce had a date, you did not. It was a school night so the kids were at home at Joyce's. You're making yourself dinner and enjoying yourself.

There's a knock at the door. If your music wasn't on you would've pretended to not be home. You set your glass down and pull your robe tighter. You crack the door with the chain in place, you let out a loud sigh of relief that it's Jim.

"Hey, Hopper. Hold on, lemme get the..." you trail off and shut the door to slide the chain away. You open the door and usher him inside with a wave of the fluffy bell sleeve of your robe. "Am I expecting you?" you ask with a tilt of your head and a disarming smile. He looks down and grins.

"No." he starts, pausing before looking into your eyes. "I have to get back home to El but, I wanted to drop by tonight before I did." his lips are twitchier than normal. You narrow your eyes playfully, your hand resting on your hip and as you shut the door behind you. "Nice robe." he says with a smirk, his nose scrunching up with it. You cock an eyebrow at him in response.

"It is a nice robe." you nod, full of attitude. "What do you want Jim?" you request, your tone softening. He reaches into his coat with one hand and side eyes you for a moment. You keep smiling expectantly at him.

"I got you something," he says in a way that sounds like you'd had to drag the information out of him. Your face screws up in reaction to how adorable he's being.

"Jim, you didn't-" you start to insist.

"I know I didn't but I wanted to," he interrupts stubbornly. You hold your lips together, showing him you were shutting up. "I went to the

store earlier to see you but you'd already left." you frown slightly, you'd daydreamed about him spontaneously visiting you at work, so you were sad you missed it. "I saw this and I uh," he clears his throat. He pulls out a Supremes compilation and you hold in an 'aw' at him. "It made me think of you and I know I've not been as attentive as I should be and I know this doesn't make up for that but," he sighs, "I saw it and said, fuck it, I've got to start making it up to you somewhere so why not start with this?" you blush at his words, your hand going to your chest, your fingertips resting lightly against the satin collar of your robe.

"Jim..." you whine affectionately, only teasing him slightly.

"Don't." he holds in a laugh with a closed lip smile. "Don't say my name like that." he chuckles as you move closer to him. "You don't have to make fun of me." he almost mumbles as you as you wrap your hands around the record, taking it from him and looking at it.

"Jim..." you say again, more teasing and exaggerated. Your fingers rest on his forearms. "This is so sweet." you pout at him. "I'm not making fun of ya." you insist, your hand heavy on his arm.

"That's not what that tone means?" he asks sarcastically, eyes still moving, not settling from your verbal doting on him.

"It's not actually." you correct him, "It's affectionate if nothing else," you add, pulling the record to your chest. "I think your straightforwardness and honesty are incredibly endearing. This is not only thoughtful, it's practical too." you give him a genuinely affectionate smile. He blushes slightly.

"I know you like The Supremes," he mumbles and you flash all your teeth in a smile at his hesitant reaction to your adoration.

"I do." you scrunch your nose at him. Having a handsome man blush at your words was a sweet spot for you and he was taking up every bit of that space right now. "Paying attention to a woman's interests is an awfully attractive quality. " you bat your eyelashes at him with a teasing grin.

"I do what I can." he laughs, running his hand through his hair.

"I didn't get you anything, now I feel bad." you let out a small laugh, looking around the room as if something will appear.

"No, it's..." he shakes his head, "It's not about that." he says with a half smile and brings you in for a hug. He speaks into your hair. "I haven't had the time to give to you that I'd like to." he whispers. At the much smoother rate that the words left him, you assumed whispering helped him get them out better. Your heart stutters and you wrap your arms around him under his coat. "I'm sorry about that. I'm working on it. I promise." he kisses the top of your head.

"I appreciate it. But don't beat yourself up over it" you pat his chest. "I'm a big girl, I can handle it, I know how busy you are." you smile at him, tilting your head up at him. "You've got your work and El. I have work and the boys and Joyce and somehow got roped into school things too." You sigh at the thought of Joyce begging you to sign up to help out after school. "We'll find the time." you say optimistically, standing on your tiptoes to plant a single kiss on his lips. As you sink back onto your heels, he wraps his arms around you and kisses you softly but with intent. His arms held you tightly but his face hovered over yours before he tilts just slightly, dipping down to push your lips together for a few moments, a few slow rounds back and forth, no tongue, just lips and little smacking noises as you pulled apart.

"I wish I had the time tonight." he whispers. You huff out a low laugh in agreement.

"Me too. Maybe next Valentine's Day?" you say softly, a suggestive inflection in your voice. Your hands run up and down his sides. His blue eyes sweep over you slowly, indulging in your physical affection while he could.

"It's a date." he grins down at you before your lips meet for another short kiss, even though you both smile through most of it. You hum into the others mouth before parting slowly.

"Go on," you tease, your tongue jutted out slightly. "Don't make another lady wait on you tonight too." you grin at each other as he stands outside your door, you're holding the door halfway open to watch him leave.

"Night, Jim." you whisper to him. He sneaks in one last kiss before he pulls away he gives you his farewell.

"Night, Annie." he whispers back. You don't flinch. You don't correct him. It didn't hurt to hear it coming from him. It was alright if one person was allowed to call you that, right?

March

It's been around four months since you'd risen from the dead.
You had gotten your own place shortly after and everyone had helped you move in. Joyce teared up just a little, she said it was because she felt like she could exhale because it meant you were staying this time. The responsibility of taking care of yourself alone was what you'd needed after dealing with what had happened to you. The more your body healed, the less others had to be around, and that's when you started missing the routine of work and kids to distract you. You felt better equipped to deal with what happened to you this time around, but at the same time the complete opposite was true. You thought you were going to die. You told Hopper you loved him. He told you he loved you. Will was back. El was back. Hopper was El's father now. Max was now apart of the secret, the party. You were chased by actual monsters. You hid from and fought off those same monsters to the death. You still get anxious when you hear gunfire after you'd nearly deafened yourself with it in defense.

But this time around. You used these as a means to drive yourself forward. You'd been scared last time, it'd made you start to switch directions in your life. But this time...this time had changed you. You couldn't help but think of this as a second chance. You didn't intend on spending your nights being miserable this time around. You used your wounds as motivators. Being happy with your life as is, taking on the challenge of truly rebuilding your life for yourself, on your terms. No more running from your problems.

So you were alone, it was going on 2 AM and you couldn't sleep, so you found yourself in your bathroom with hair color. How mature of you. You knew you'd probably get teased for doing it but you did it anyway because it felt like the right thing to do.

You move the hairdryer over your hair and sigh heavily. You never realized how much you look like your sister until now. You knew it was cliche, but you needed a change after facing possible death and coming out of the other side. You had changed in the year between the incidents, and now here we were again, you felt a final shove into a new chapter in your life. A new chapter here in Hawkins.

You frown as the thought of Jim crosses your mind. Nothing had come of your dramatic exit's words yet. You'd been around each other, spoken hesitantly. He'd secretly given you a present on Valentine's day as a good faith gesture. You hadn't had the time to sit and talk, ask about this new electricity that ran between the two of you. But then again, you had been healing, he had a teen girl to raise, it wasn't like things were easy. But they never really have been. You hadn't been ignoring each other like you tried to do last time, but you didn't want to barge into his already complicated life either.

April
You were behind the counter at the record store you'd taken a chance on asking about a job at. After you'd gotten in a passionate discussion about the production choices of Bad for Good versus Bat Out of Hell with the owner you hadn't expected to get the job, but apparently that was precisely what caused you to get hired. As soon as the doctor cleared you, you'd went out and looked for a job, this being the place you'd been led to first, similar interests and all. You welcomed the distraction. It wasn't the best paying but it also wasn't the worst. Predictable hours, low stress most days, you felt pretty good about it all in all. You spent the majority of your time alone, dancing around the store while doing inventory while you waited for customers. Life could be a lot worse.

You hear the bell ring on the door and in comes Joyce with two brown paper bags in her hands and as you meet her eyes she stops.
"Ann! Your hair!" she gasps, moving quickly up to the counter and touching it. "It looks so good! It's so weird but you look so pretty." she dotes over your newly brunette locks. "I brought us lunch, hope that's alright."

"Yeah I hate it when you do that." you say sarcastically and she squints her eyes at you and you laugh.

You both sit on a bench outside the shop and eat.

"You still coming over to stay tonight?" she asks inquisitively.

"You know I don't miss girls night." you say low and serious. You had started trying to stick to the schedule of every few weeks, lives admitting, where you stayed over at her house with the boys out of the house for most of the night. You drank too much, you had a lot of fun. You liked the dancing the most, it was your favorite vice right now. It was a wholesome way to vent that was cheap and could double as exercise so it really was something you looked forward to. It was a small way to feel like you hadn't totally lost the ability to be and have fun like you used to. With the new job you were particularly looking forward to this tonight to kick off your weekend.

"I also invited Jim and El over tonight." she says quietly.

You stop chewing at look at her, your brow dropping. "Oh?" you say far too high pitched, your body reacting stiffly to the news.

"That sweet girl needs some more female influence in her life. I know Hopper is doing his best but...only so much a man can know." she says humorously, shrugging at the excuse. "And you've not talked to him about it yet, have you?" she says in a slightly scolding tone. You sigh and pout at her. You know specifically what 'it' she was referring to.

"No, not really, " you say in a much lower voice, feeling slightly defensive. She starts to open her mouth but you interrupt. "I know. I should. I've been thinking about it, I swear." you hold your hand up in surrender. You hadn't told her about the phone call at New Years or of his short visit on Valentine's Day, even though neither would count as having talked about the specific events Joyce was referring to. You'd elected to withhold this information until you two had been able to talk about how you might feel. You were trying not to get too carried away before you heard what he had to say first.

"Seems to me there are a lot more things that need to be said between you two." she says side eyeing you.

"Yeah. I don't know what exactly but..." you trail off and shrug. "I

don't think we'll get to have a very deep conversation with you and El there though." you sassily retort, taking another bite of your sandwich.

"No, but you two need to break the tension that's just gonna keep growing and growing if you don't cut it now." she states matter of factly.

"That's a touch hypocritical of you to give for advice isn't it Joy?" you say playfully but serious.

"Hush. I've handled my problems, you worry about yours." she pokes your arm. "And for more advice that you didn't ask for, I think you should set up a time to talk to him. Alone." she chews her bite of food, "Otherwise, it is not going to happen between your schedule, our boys, his job, and El." she emphasizes her words with her hands, "Trust me, from a parent, it's not going to just fall together that you're magically alone together one night. Just not happenin'." she shakes her head.

"I was kind of counting on that." you half joke.

"I'm just trying to help." he says with food in her mouth in defense of herself. You sigh and twirl your finger in your much softer than before curls.

"I know. I'm just," you groan, "I'm trying." you rush out. She aw's at you, patting your thigh.

"I know you are! I'm proud of you, you really are doing so much better than this time last year." she nods enthusiastically. "It's my job to push you because it's my right as the older one, that's all." she grins, her nose scrunching into a cute fox-like face. "And I just want you happy." she pats your leg supportively.

You finish eating and as you're about to leave she reaches out and fusses with your hair. "He's gonna love it by the way," she smirks. You wipe your hands on your jeans and screw up your face in question at her. "Your hair."

"Oh yeah, Jonathan has been pretty vocal about his opinion that I

should go with my natural hair color." you chuckle, fluffing it with your fingers.

She gives your shoulder a shove, you laugh at her actions.
"Not Jonathan." she shakes her head, her lips in a tight line. "The boys will love it but... I meant Hop." she whispers.

"Oh!" you say surprised. You thought he might make fun of your sudden drastic change but that was about as far as you'd thought that through in regard to his opinion. "I hadn't really taken that into consideration." you chew on your bottom lip, looking at your reflection in the shop window.

"It does make you look a lot more like me." she giggles, looking at your reflections with you. "Which I really like. Now we really look like we're sisters."

"Yeah, we do." you put your arms around each other's sides and smiling. She was right, you really did feel like sisters again.

10. Reflection & Reassurance

"I promise I won't get wasted, dirty dance or swear as much as usual. I'll dial it back like, 80%." you say throwing back the last bit of beer in your bottle as Joyce went to open the door to your new guests to girls night. You had to think of a new name for it now that Jim was involved. You frown at the realization.

You leaned against the archway from the living room to the kitchen. The nightgown you usually wore with Joyce would have been too short to be appropriate dinner attire so you'd decided to add leggings underneath it. Both Joyce and yourself had decided to already be wearing your pajamas when they came over in an attempt to make El feel more comfortable. You were excited to spend more time with her, it was nice to interact with her when the world wasn't ending.

"If I'd known the dress code was so casual I would've changed." he jokes to Joyce as she takes his coat from him. He's still smiling as his eyes find you across the room. Joyce takes El's bag over to the couch and Jim walks over to you.

"You do something to your hair?" he teases, his nose scrunching as he holds back a smile. You hadn't known how he'd react but you were pleased with his warm expression.

"Yeah I curled it." you answer sarcastically, grinning up at him, your arms still crossed.

"I love it," he says low, leaning in closer to you as he does. A subtle smile appears on his face. You melt only just slightly. "It brings out your eyes." his words make your pulse quicken, his eyes narrow as he looks you over. He pushes a strand of your dark hair behind your ear and you purse your lips at the gesture, feeling like this is high-level PDA and everyone else will notice. The shiver you suppressed as his finger ran over your jaw after moving your hair might've made you take a more noticeable than intended inhale of breath. Your cheeks feel hot under his watchful eyes.

"Thanks." you breathe out slowly. You rejected the intensity of the sensation, that small thrill of an adrenaline rush. "I never realized

how much I looked like Joy until now." you purse your lips together after they'd fallen open while you looked up at him.

"Yeah I don't know how I'll tell you two apart." he grins down at you playfully. You shove his shoulder, your hand lingering for a moment before you roll your eyes and smile, moving him out of your way to start the night with the girls.

He smokes on the front porch alone, watching the three of you together. Joyce was clapping to the beat, swaying, laughing and bopping her head. You have El's hand, trying to show her how to move her hips. She, of course, had brought up the Snow Ball and how she hadn't known how to dance and you'd decided you had to fix that. He hears the music through the filter of the window. He sees you mouthing words and keeping the beat with your hips. After the chorus hits he realizes why it sounds so familiar. It was the song you'd sang as you walked away from him at the lab. He smirks to himself, he should've known it was The Supremes. The way El's face lit up as you clapped to the beat, swinging and singing enthusiastically during the chorus made his smile find it's way all the way up into his eyes. The way you moved slow to teach, your arms over your head as your hips twisted in a much more PG kind of way then he was used to. He found the smile staying on his face while El stiffly imitated you. You praise her efforts and her eyes light up.

He'd snuck outside to find a moment to himself. He'd felt that gnawing feeling in his chest of the significance of having all 4 of you together. He felt the endearing pull again. He remembers seeing you crying, swaying and mouthing the words to the song in your room the night he told you he was leaving for good. With you left all alone without your sister in the house, he would be lying if he said staying hadn't crossed his mind. Decades later he now knows you were both just kids who knew nothing in retrospect. You wouldn't be here like this with him now if your big doe eyes and raw emotions had gotten what they wanted. He couldn't help but still take the song especially personally all these years later.

Here he was, a father again, with the two girls he spent the most time with growing up, now with his teen daughter. He certainly owed you for doing more than you ever had to in explaining the complexities

that came with growing up to her. You'd never flinched no matter the subject, unlike him. He found himself stuttering over the most basic biology textbook terminology when he'd look into El's big naive eyes. His mind would blank at her blunt questions on occasion. Then in you would swoop, putting your hands on him tenderly to wordlessly calm him as you shut the book and spoke to her in the sweetest voice, allowing him to slip away to smoke, to recharge and try again when he was ready.

He was noticing that you were making his life better by being involved in it. He had been so set in his way of thinking of you as being something he had to deal with before, something that made his life harder. Now he couldn't help but see all the ways you made it easier.

After what you'd said to each other. After he found you alive. He'd seen a change. A softness and care in your actions he hadn't before. He saw the patience on your face as you settled pointless arguments between teenagers. He saw the way you took care of Joyce and the boys. You kept her distracted when Will would leave the house without her. When she would break at the thought of losing him again, you'd get on your bike and keep tabs on him so she could calm down. He'd held her hand while you spoke to her over the phone on some of these nights. You helped with homework, dinner, pick ups, drop offs and doctors appointments. Even though you'd never taken any credit for helping, you'd always shrug off his compliments and say that's just what you were supposed to do for people you loved.

He'd seen your weary eyes, bloodshot when he'd found you outside alone, your hand rubbing your temple in annoyance at all the emotions the kids threw at you when they vented their problems to you in secrecy. The calm rage you harbored toward the other students that picked on your big, broken, strange family. You'd taken on the role of protector so naturally, he thought. He once again found himself wondering why you'd never wanted this for yourself. He thought you were so gifted at it, even if you didn't.

His favorite changes were how you interacted with him now. Your hands would find opportunities to touch him. It was mostly comforting touches, letting a gentle squeeze on his forearm or shoulder be a signal to calm himself down from time to time. But

there were also touches that kept him up at night. The times you'd rubbed his shoulders without a word when you found him with his head down, knowing he'd needed it. He was still inclined to shiver at the thought of your nails raking over his scalp, triggering an involuntary groan from him. He remembers the sound of the quiet laugh you made at his noises.

There was also how you'd tuck your hair behind your ears when you'd catch him staring at you now. Then you'd poorly suppress a smile and look away. Sometimes you'd be watching him through the living room window as he took El home. Swaying your body, a glass of alcohol swirling in your hand, you'd softly smile at him, waving until he was out of sight and he'd see the light from the window fade as you shut the curtains. His favorite was when he'd catch you looking at him, you'd scrunch your nose at him playfully, never flinching. He knew there was so much he wanted to say and do when it came to you, but he was finding it hard to find an opportunity to have a conversation that could go on well into the morning.

At the end of the song you sway out of sight, he's reached the end of his cigarette, it was time for him to go back in. The lights are off as he opens the front door.

Joyce has El on the couch, her arm around her and an old crochet blanket that looked vaguely familiar to him. She's letting El work the remote as she smiles over at him, showing him she's got this covered. He moves to the sunroom where he smells your cigarette smoke drifting from.

"This officially your new hiding spot?" he asks, sitting in the chair next to you, as he always does when he finds you alone here.

"Seems that way." you turn to him in the seat, your face and chest are flushed from dancing. "Not much hiding going on when you find me every time." you smirk, leaving your cigarette in the tray, your fingers clasping your hands together with your elbow on the back of the chair.

"You know how hard it is to get you alone?" he laughs, turning his head to you, his elbows on his knees. "I have to hunt you down to talk to you." he grins, knocking your foot with his hand.

You rest your chin on your hand and sigh. "Yeah, I know." you side eye him. "It's hard to get myself alone for long." you mumble, looking down at the floor.

"Yeah." his face falls a bit, chewing his bottom lip in thought. You both sit in silence for too long. Maybe it was the endorphins from dancing that made you step up, maybe it was just finally time you stopped making excuses.

"I do still want to talk about that night though." you gently knock his leg with your foot. "I didn't think I was giving off the vibe that I didn't want to, it's just..." you frown and shrug.

"Yeah I didn't think you were ignoring me like last time." he grins while he looks at the floor. You smirk at his remark. You knock him with your foot a little harder this time.

"Well, things are more than a little different than they were last time." you feel brave and meet his stare and give him a hesitant smile.

"Yes they are." he says low, you see his eyes move to your lips. There were endless layers to his response.

"I figure we should set a whole night aside for it. Who knows what will want to come out of my mouth this time." you let out a small, quiet, nervous laugh.

"I can't remember the last time I had a whole night to myself." he sighs with a hint of frustration.

You give him a sympathetic pout.

"If a night comes up where I somehow find myself alone, I'll let you know." he says quietly, leaning in closer to you. You guess he was trying to keep his words from possible prying ears.

"I'm looking forward to it." you give him a sweet smile. He returns the expression. You start chewing on your bottom lip to distract yourself from his handsome face.

"In the meantime, " he clears his throat, "There is something I need

your help with." he side-eyes you, a mischievous grin on his face.

"That look means it's something bad." you scold, you rest your elbow on the back of the wooden chair, flipping your hair over to one side.

"No, no, come on, sweetheart, it's me, why would it be bad?" he continues grinning, his face lit up with a playful energy. You lift your chin to acknowledge his response. "Do you have any idea how many times I've had to listen to "It's Raining Men" because of you?" his nose scrunches up in hopefulness that he'd get to hear that big laugh of yours one more time before he left for the night. He gets his wish.

Your head falls back, your hand goes to your chest and your face scrunches up before you have to cover your mouth to quiet yourself and you look over at him, your eyes lit up before you reveal your bitten lip to hold in the noise, as you lean over to slap his leg. "El wants to listen to it so much I had to "lose"," he does finger quotations and hushes his voice again and you both lean in closer as he whispers. "The tape because it was driving me crazy." He waits for you to gasp for air after your fit of laughter and start wiping the tears from the corners of your eyes before he speaks again. "She says you introduced her to it so if you could stop encouraging her it would really help me out." he sputters with laughter at the last moment.

"I'm so sorry." you murmur out from behind your hand as you stifle another laugh. "It's a good dance song, I'm sorry." you choke out, you couldn't remember the last time you laughed like this. "I'll cut back on it for your sake." you're scrunching your nose and putting your hand casually on his leg. You couldn't help yourself, you continue to suppress your laughter as his eyes watch you, wide and engaged. You felt a ghost of the feeling in your gut to run from the intimacy. At this moment, your bodies so close, laughing together in the dark, you'd never had an easier time pushing the feeling away.

11. Dancing & Domesticity

MAY----------

Jim started dropping off El instead of staying. You could feel him grow more anxious the longer he stayed, the closer you let your bodies get. The longer it went without you talking about your moment, the more the tension grew. You found yourself missing him. But without Jim there you got to drink and dance more, which was what you wanted out of girls night originally anyway.

You build the knowledge base that Jim has given El of dancing. Which surprises you. You remember him dancing when he was younger, but that wasn't something you'd expect the big man to keep up with. You let her watch MTV, rated R movies and answered any questions she had that she couldn't ask Jim. You were always dancing when he would pull in to pick her up. She'd light up at the sight of him most nights. She grabs her bag and bounds out the door after her polite goodbyes. He had taught her good manners.

He watches the two of you dancing in the living room as he pulls up every time now. He knows you'll switch the music after you lock the door behind El and pour yourself another drink. If he was lucky you'd have an outer layer he'd get to watch you slink off to the beat of a song he couldn't hear. He gets to watch you dance as he pulls away. It was a small thing he was allowing himself to indulge in.

One night he finds himself stalling longer than usual. He'd had a particularly rough day, trying not to share that information with El on his face as she sits next to him in the car.

"I like watching her dance too." El interrupts his time-killing fidgeting.

"Wh-Huh?" he turns his face fast towards her, she's looking at him with big honest eyes.

"Ann." she nods, looking back to you through the window. "She's a

good dancer. I like watching her too." she elaborates. He stutters, surprised at her words and the fact that she noticed.

"Yeah. She uh, she is." he says gruffly, trying to recover his indifferent expression.

"If you like watching her, why don't you come inside to dance with her?" she asks, her face indifferent.

"Well, kid, I don't know if she'd want me to do that." he lets out a small laugh as he moves to grab the gear shift.

"She would." she nods again at him. "She says she misses having someone tall and handsome to dance with." El continues, looking back to you again for a moment before moving back to the cabin of the car. "You are tall and handsome. So she would like that." she says flatly, making him laugh out loud, she jumps at his response.

"I'm handsome?" he laughs, it shakes his shoulders and he ruffles her hair. "Where on earth did you hear that one, kid?" he asks, turning in the driveway.

"Ann." she says looking out the window not realizing what she'd given away.

JUNE----------

You lazily reach over the side of the couch to pick up the ringing phone. You're deep in a book and don't even bother closing it to answer, your eyes finishing the last sentence before you speak.

"Horowitz." you answer flatly.

"Hey Ann." you hear his voice trial slightly on your name.

"Hey hun, what's going on?" you ask casually.

"A lot. Actually." your eyes go a bit wide in concern, but he soothes your nerves almost immediately. "No, not like that." he lets out a small breathy laugh because he could imagine your face on the other

end of the line. "I'm going to be out of town with work and I need to call in a favor." he asks reluctantly.

"Uh huh. I see." you answer, "It'll cost you but I might be willing to help." you grin, finally shutting the book and concentrating fully on the conversation.

"Well, it's a big favor. So I will in fact, very much owe you after this." he chuckles.

"Stop making me worry and just tell me." you say with a soft laugh. Since when was he the dramatic one?

"Alright." he clears his throat. "I need you to watch El for me." he says, his voice confident but reserved.

"Jim, that's nothing! When do you need me? You wanna bring her to Joyce's or?" you ask, moving your hand in explanation to no one.

"No I mean at the cabin." he says lower.

"Oh." you say, your mouth remaining in the "O" shape as your eyes move around the room.

"Yeah I'll be gone for two days and I really don't want her alone that long." you hear the love for her in his voice. Your lips pout at the feeling it gives you.

"I think I'm starting to catch on to why this is a big favor." you say lower. So staying confined in his cabin, with his daughter, taking care of her, being very...domestic. You were not surprised he remembered your conversation that well from the night you agreed to stay, but it touched you in a way that made you want to do any favor he asked. You weren't used to people taking your feelings into account first when building relationships before. Until you'd come back home. Here people listened and cared. You get a funny pain in your chest when you dwell on it too long.

"Yeah." he draws out the word. "I don't want to push any weird unspoken boundaries or anything, but if you would stay with her I would really, really-" you cut him off.

"Save the sales pitch, Jim. I'll do it." you say as if it's nothing. There was a moment of silence on the line.

"That..." you hear him exhale. "Thank you so much, Ann you have no idea what this takes off my mind." you can practically hear his shoulders relax in his tone.

"You'll still owe me. Big time. But you know I'll never pass on an opportunity to have the upper hand on you." you give a soft laugh into the receiver. You suppose you were looking forward to the challenge. Time to play house for a few days.

Since El was still on the down low, for the time being, you have secluded to the cabin without Hopper around. Being alone taking care of a kid you were responsible for had been a living nightmare of yours. And look at you now. She was such a polite, quiet kid that you didn't have much trouble out of her. You asked her what she wanted to do and you did it. You played good cop while the bad cop was out of the house. You'd decided to indulge her with rom-coms, nail polish and answered all her questions along the way. You'd read to her and she to you. You'd start boardgames you didn't read the rules to, making up your own and ended up not finishing, losing many pieces over the span of three days, you'd deal with the consequences later, right now you just had to get her to bed one last time.

He see's your bike tucked away on the side of the house out of the elements. He quietly pads his way to the door, unlocking the door quietly as it was very late already. He was supposed to be back tomorrow but drove home tonight instead of waiting. He looks around and see's no one, but the lamp in the bedroom is on. He takes off his outer layers, getting comfortable. He sees no dirty dishes, laundry folded on the coffee table and he wonders who you must've paid to watch El instead of doing it yourself with the level of housework he notices is finished. Had you gotten her to do all her chores too? He was honestly a bit taken back by the level of thoroughness you'd approached this favor with. He walks to the kitchen, a poorly made cake sits on the counter top, two pieces cut out of it, a big sloppily draw green icing heart on the top. You must've tried teaching her to bake. He laughs as he pokes a finger

into the icing, stealing a dollop. He goes to the fridge to find the grocery shopping finished and meal wrapped in foil in the center of the shelf. He shakes his head and smiles at the thought of you both cooking in the kitchen together.

He decides to check on you, he opens the door to find you curled up in a chair pulled up against her bed. She's deep asleep, you're awake, your nose buried in a book, your eyes are intently focused, your brow low. Your cheek rests on your hand, elbow on the arm of the chair. Your socks show from under the blanket you'd wrapped yourself up in. You don't notice him for a few long seconds. He sees you watching over El, having read her to sleep, still staying in the same room as her even though you didn't have to. He felt a deep shift in his chest and stomach at the sight.

As you yawn your eyes leave the book and you see his head between the door and the frame. You mouth 'hey' and take a big stretch as you quietly leave the room.

"You're back early." you whisper, shutting the door behind you after you give her one final glance.

"I just drove home instead of staying the night." he says, moving out of your way as you head to the kitchen, still stretching and yawning.

"Well, welcome back." you grin, opening the fridge and rubbing your eyes, grabbing a soda. "Food's in here for ya if you want it. " you say, moving the door with your hip and leaning against the counter.

He moves past you to get a beer, which you'd also bought. He looks you over, your hair not styled, no makeup and draws back one corner of his mouth in contemplation of the sight.

"You can stop staring. I know you've not seen me all natural and unkempt many times," you say with a small laugh, moving your hand to present yourself, your cotton shorts and a tank top. Your favorite threadbare flannel over it for modesty and to help cover the still dark scars from your encounters last year, the biggest scar across your upper thigh just peaking out beneath the hem of the mid-thigh hitting shorts. "But that doesn't mean you have to make me self-conscious about it." you smirk and shake your head at him.

"That wasn't my intention." he smiles softly at you, his eyes look like they're searching for something in the distance when he looks at you. "I actually was thinking you looked nice until you opened your mouth." you both choke back your laughter.

"That's usually how it goes." you shrug indifferently, keeping your laughter quiet to not wake El. You turn to go sit at the table.

"What did you girls get into while I was away?" he asks, sitting across from you with a grunt.

"You know, the usual. Drinking, drug trafficking, thefts under $500." you pause while he snorts at your words. "Picking up hitchhikers, introducing her to the idea of teenage rebellion against her father, taking candy from strangers," you shrug casually, "You know, the basics. All the things a young girl needs to know." you grin at him, resting your chin on your hand.

"I should've known better than to leave her with you." he narrows his eyes, a warm smile on his face at your comfortable demeanor.

"We watched movies, painted her nails, read a lot actually. She loves that. " you nod and run your finger over the table in thought, trying to recall if there was anything worth mentioning.

"And baked apparently?" he asks, motioning his head to the cake behind him. You let out a small chuckle.

"Well I made cookies, and those are fast. So she assumed baking a cake would be just as easy and she was so excited about the idea of surprising you with a cake I couldn't say no." your face goes soft at the thought.

"Yeah she gets like that sometimes." he smiles at a memory of her. "I guess I should thank you for also doing all the shopping and cleaning too." he says in a sarcastic tone, but he's really just impressed.

"I know how hot and bothered you get when I go all domestic." you get out before the low chuckle escapes you. He blushes and covers his mouth as he laughs, looking away from you. "Couldn't' pass up on the chance to exceed your expectations." you explain, a smile on your

face at the red on his face.

"Well, you did. You even got her to do her chores?" he says impressed.

"Yeah, I just put on some music and danced around and helped her. Wasn't an issue at all." you speak with your hands, your face soft and unbothered. "I think we got everything." you chew your lip, looking around the cabin. "I did shopping and we swept, laundry, dishes, restocked the firewood...yeah. I think I held down the fort pretty well." you swing your head back over to him with a proud smile.

"You did exceed expectations yet again." he crosses his arms on the table leaning forward and looking you over again.

"Never get tired of hearing that." you shake your head proudly. "Thanks." you bat your eyelashes and press your chin to your shoulder sheepishly.

"No. Thank you." he points at you before reaching out and taking your hand. He slides his fingers against yours and rests them on the table top, as he looks intently into your eyes. The sudden intimate nature of the gesture catches you off guard as your mouth falls open for a second as you're obviously affected by the small touch. "Seriously." his voice drops and you lean in to match his posture. "Thank you." he says again, squeezing your hand.

"You're welcome." leaning forward and putting both your hands on his, you give him a quick peck for his sweet words. He's giving you that dumb little smile of his, his teeth just barely showing.

"I would've been a mess without you here this weekend." he almost whispers. His smooth tone makes it your turn to blush.

"You're a mess whether I'm here or not, Jim." you pick at him, your nose scrunching but your lips send a different sort of smile his way.

"Yeah, but I prefer to be a mess with you around." he squeezes your hands and pulls you closer, making you put your legs underneath you in the chair to lean on the table to be able to stretch over to him. You shake your head with a reluctance to your actions as his grin grows

wider the closer you get. He closes the rest of the space between you and returns the kiss you'd given him, but thankfully this one goes on longer.

"When'd you get so sweet, Jim?" you coo at him, as he lets your hands go, as you slide back into your seat. You don't want El to wake up and see you crawling across the table to her protector. You fluff your hair and sigh at him, your defenses down.

"I could ask you the same question." he answers smugly. His words make you blush. Again.

12. Music & Misunderstanding

JUNE
He sat on the couch at Joyce's house. He had your collection of tapes sitting on the coffee table, looking for something to trigger a thought, a memory, anything to recall to think of where you could be.

Jonathan sits next to him, his elbows on his knees as he leans forward with Hopper to look at the tapes. He can tell Jim is trying to think of something but seems to be falling short. "Trying to break the code that is Ann's tape labels?" he huffs out quietly, trying to lighten the tension and also be helpful.

"Yeah." he says slowly, his hand on his chin, bouncing on his knee in thought.

"Maybe I can help? I did help her make a lot of these." he offers, scooting the box closer to him slightly.

"I'm just..." he sighs. "I thought maybe there was something here to figure out where she went." he rubs his hand over his face, his hand moving to his temple, arm still shaking from his knee.

"If we knew why it'd help." he mumbles.

"Yeah, no kidding." he huffs out, his hands clasping together in front of him. Jonathan notices he keeps fidgeting. He sees more than just the worry about a friend behind Jim's eyes. He hesitates to tell him, he knew you'd be both mad and embarrassed if you ever knew that he, himself, knew about it, let alone telling Jim. It felt a bit like betrayal, but he was hurt and felt justified in his actions.

"You know there's a tape for you, right?" he says quietly, leaning in closer so his mom doesn't hear. Jim's leg stills. He turns his head just slightly to Jonathan, his face serious as he looms over him. Jonathan sighs when he doesn't say anything in response. "It's this one." he takes out the tape named 'Indiana.'

"She told you about this?" he asks, his voice low and serious, but his surprise still shows through.

"No." he shakes his head. "She'd be so mad if she knew I'd figured it out." he lets out a small laugh at the thought. "She'll be furious if she finds out I told you." his eyes go a little wide to ask discretion from the Chief. "But she shouldn't have left like this." he shakes his head, starting to feel another wave of anger towards you again.

"You said you, figured it out?" he asks, trying to hide the strain he felt in his throat.

"I figured out this was the tape she made for you." he moves the cassette in the air as he speaks, looking over your handwriting on the cover. "Ann likes her secrets, but she's a real chatty hopeless romantic when she drinks wine, so I knew there had to be one of these about you with the way you two look at each other." he side eyes the Chief, shaking his head in disappointment at your continued denial of your feelings. "It's the only tape with songs with the name Jim in the title. You know how she loves matching people's names to songs," he mumbles, trying to stay mad at you. A fond memory of you comes to both of them. "It's the sappiest mix in this whole box." he holds it out to him. "This is like looking into her head, or her heart, or whatever." he sighs, feeling like he's betraying you but thinking he has your best interests at heart. "So just..."He makes sure Hopper looks into his eyes when he speaks, to emphasize his words importance."...be aware of the power of what's on this, please? You can't go back once you listen to it." Jim hesitantly takes it from him. Feeling like he'd been handed the keys to your secret diary. "If there's something that might help you find her, it'll be in there." he nods at the box. He gives Hopper a tight smile and goes to his room, listening to one of the most recent tapes you'd made together.

You stick the handwritten note on the wall in Joyce's kitchen. You couldn't reach anyone and you'd made the last minute decision to take a trip you'd been putting off for too long. There was an anniversary coming up that you had tried to ignore for years now, and it was time to stop pretending.

You yawn as you open the door to your apartment. You'd been gone for just under two days, back with plenty of time to rest before work. You let your bags hit the floor, swatting on the light switch.

"HOLYFUCKHOPWHYAREYOUHERE?!" you shout quickly. Your hands balled into shaking fists as he almost literally scares the piss out of you. "HOLY SHIT DUDE!" you say loudly exasperated, putting your hand on your rapidly rising and falling chest. Your mouth was still open, your eyes still wide as he stomped over to you. He gives you very little room to exist between him and your door that he locks without looking away from you.

"Where the hell have you been?" his voice is desperate and low, on the verge of a growl. He glares down at you, his arms going up on either side of you. His eyes are dark and dangerous, his mouth almost in a snarl as he hisses the words at you. Your first thought is to panic. You did not like what he was doing, you were very aware he could hurt you if he wanted to. You were incredibly confused by his behavior. Your hands were up in defense as if he was going to hit you, you gritted your teeth, bracing for impact out of instinct. "I'm not going to hit you Annie, Jesus Christ." he wraps his arms around you tightly. You're even more confused. You managed to get out the most prominent thought in your head right.

"What the fuck?" you say shakily, pushing him away, dipping under his arms to move towards your bedroom, not turning your back to him.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you," he says quietly, trying not startle you again, he holds his hands up in surrender to you. "Shit, I'm sorry." he whispers out, sadness taking over his words as he holds his face in his hands for a moment, taking a deep breath. "You've been gone for two days and we've all gone fucking crazy thinking you'd ran again." he angrily whispers, walking towards you slowly.

"Don't EVER come at me like that again." you say, gasping, trying to push back the fight or flight response your system was trying to force upon you. You hold up one finger to him to stress it's importance.

He swallows loudly and nods, his body language softening. "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have lost control like that. I'd never hurt you, sweetheart, believe me." he says, inching closer to you. You still glared at him. "What did you expect from me after disappearing like that? You know how I get." he says low, his voice turning to concern instead of anger.

"Not an excuse." you shake your head, looking at the floor. "Besides, I left a note." you say, still slowing your breathing.

"A note? There was no note." You nod, correcting him and your posture, trying to finish calming down.

"I left a note on the wall at Joyce's because I couldn't get up with anyone." you gulp and feel your heart start to slow.

"We looked everywhere, we didn't see one." he moves in close to you, his arms extended as he slowly brings his hands closer to your body.

"It was over the counter on the far wall. I put it there, I don't know what happened to it after that but I put it there." you say, talking with your hands. He gently holds your arms down and lets out the breath he's been holding in since Joyce had called him to say she couldn't find you.

"You weren't running?" he whispers, relief flooding his voice and face as he shuts his eyes.

"No." you say offended. "The opposite if anything," you mumble, your face drops, seeing the worry lines in his brows, his hair wasn't combed, you wonder if he'd slept. You felt your heart and stomach churn seeing his reaction to thinking you'd left. "I haven't felt the pull to leave in a while, Jim. Not now that I have people I can't live without here." you give him a half smile, feeling his body untense beneath your hands.

"Oh, Annie," he whispers weakly. His arms fall around you, be buries his face in the bend of your neck. You frown and hold his head, nuzzling into him, trying to comfort him. Your hand rubs his back, you feel his heart racing in his chest pressed against yours. "I thought you'd left," he says muffled into your hair, his words heavy with relief. " I thought you were gone, baby." he whispers desperately, his hands holding your face, his voice strained with emotion.

Baby? You thought to yourself. Your heart stutters. You feel like someones got a vice grip on your heart at the thought of the heavy weight of the word. This was different. This was a new development. You looked into his eyes and couldn't help but like being called baby

if it meant he looked at you like this.

"I keep coming back to you, don't I?" you say, a smile on your lips at the relief on his face. "I didn't actually leave though. This time." you scrunch your nose at him and he laughs and kisses you. Not hard, not demanding, just purely affectionate.

"If you weren't running, where did you go?" he asks innocently, not knowing what he was asking you to reveal. His face is calmer, his eyes less frantic.

"Yeah, about that." you begin, taking a deep breath. "Uh, I need to tell you something." you gently pull away from him and start to take off your boots and jacket so you can try to relax. "It's not bad it's just... personal," you mumble the last word as he joins you on the couch. He sits close enough to hold you to his chest. You had a feeling he wasn't going to let go of you anytime soon. You saw how close he'd kept to El after she closed the gate. You imagined, and hopefully not narcissistically so, that he might be compelled to act in a similar way with you. "Only Joyce knows about this." you mumble, your fingers moving on his forearm. "The boys don't know so..." you shrug, you knew he understood.

He says nothing because he knows to just let you take your time. You loved that quality in him.

"I decided last minute to go and visit where my husband is buried," you say, your face unsure, your chest hurts again. He doesn't reject you, he doesn't move away, he rests his chin on your head as he continues you hold you. "He uh, went to Vietnam and he didn't come back home. We got married before he left because...I was young and in love, why not." you quickly add the last part, you still feel a slight shame for taking the chance and failing miserably at your first attempt at a healthy monogamous relationship. You know you shouldn't but you do.

"Is that who Jack is?" he asks quietly, referring to your tattoo.

"Yes, it is." you answer calmly. You turn to look at his face, and run your fingers over his beard. "Thank you for not asking me about it." you whisper, your face completely soft. You weren't sure when he'd

seen it but your heart swelled at the thought that he'd let it go.

"I know you well enough to know better." he gives you a small sly smile. You nod, a small smile on your lips.

"It was our anniversary this weekend and I hadn't been up there in years. I felt like I needed to this time." you turn away from him, but rest your body fully against his. "Since things have changed," you add quietly. Your tone meant it in a casual, general sense. But you also meant it in a much more serious way, specific to you and Jim. "I had to say goodbye. Seemed like the right thing to do." you feel nervous, your stomach quivers.

"I think so too." he kisses the top of your head. "I'm proud of you." he kisses your ear after he whispers to you.

"So that's, uh, where I was." you clear your throat and hold his hand as you cross your arms over your body. Trying to ignore what his lips on your ear did.

"I'm really sorry I reacted like I did, sweetheart." his words muffled in your hair. "I just..." he groans, you feel his breath traveling over your scalp. "I lost control at the thought of losing you like that. It was way too soon after..." you squeeze his hand and he sighs again. "It wasn't just Joyce's reaction. I had to think about what to tell El. I didn't want to be the reason you left and have to deal with the void you'd create in everyone's life." his arms wrap tightly around you. "I really didn't mean to scare you, sweetheart. Then you tell me why you were gone and now I feel like a real asshole." you laugh at his words. He plants an affectionate kiss on your shoulder. As you freeze in his arms, he moves to look at your face, confused.

"JOYCE!" you yell, shooting from the couch to go for the phone.

"Shit." he mumbles, fumbling to get off the couch and standing by you as you called your sister who still didn't know you were back.

13. Nostalgia & Now

Summary for the Chapter:

> The tracklist for the mixtapes and inspo for the fic are at the end of the Chapter. <3

He knows he promised you he'd tell you when he had a night alone. But the cassette Jonathan had given him was burning a hole in his pocket, metaphorically speaking. It'd been in his glove box, taunting him every time he opened it.

After he parks the Blazer and turns the key to play the radio, he looks over at the glove box a torn expression on his face.
He'd come out to an old service road where he knew he'd be alone. He didn't know all the songs you'd written on the sleeve of the box, he wasn't sure what he was in for.

He taps the box against the steering wheel, the tape making a clacking noise every time he did so. Was he really going to do this? He didn't have to listen to it to find you anymore. But the draw of the power of the insight into how you feel about him was too strong. He felt a bit cowardly doing this but he felt like he couldn't get through your thick skin on intuition alone. Part of him felt like he deserved to know how you felt so he could make up for the time lost wondering. He licked his lips, his eyes darted around the scenery outside the car, he stalled. He needed to know. He feels his heart race, feeling desperate to look into yours for answers.

His natural curiosity wins, he pushed the tape into the deck. His finger hovers over the play button. He lets out a loud noise of frustration. He presses play.

The first song that plays he recognizes. No going back now.

July

His shift was winding down. He kept glancing at the clock until the time passed that he'd agreed upon with himself earlier in the day to work to. The evening was settling in, he was driving on back roads,

windows down, doing rounds on some of the more secluded farms on the outskirts of his jurisdiction. Your tape played over the speakers. He hadn't been able to stop listening to it. Some of the songs made him tear up, some made his eyes immediately turn to hearts, thinking of your voice saying those things to him. The collection of songs spanned different genre's and decades and he wondered how many other songs had made him cross your mind over the years.

He kept waiting for your choices to tell him what he needed to do. With summer in full swing, it was getting harder to be apart. With the kid's lives intertwined, you saw each other fairly often. But that was it. He had thought of trying to sneak you away, find a moment to whisper in your ear so he can feel your body shiver when his breath hits you. There hadn't been time for him to tell you how much he'd been thinking about you. About how beautiful you were with this dark hair and your tan skin that comes and goes with the seasons. To tell you how what you're wearing is driving him crazy. The heat was getting to him.

The early night air felt full of opportunities, like it always did in the summer, reminding you of being younger, freer than you were now. It made you feel a little more alive.

The crackle of his radio takes him by surprise. He turns your music down and answers.

"You know my shifts almost over right?" he smirks despite being alone, in his tone to Flo.

"Yeah, just a short note to close out the night for you."

"Shoot." he sighs reluctantly.

"Joyce called. She said Annette left and she doesn't know where she's gone. She said, and I was asked to quote this, "Please tell him not to freak out. Don't. Freak. Out. Full stop." Flo chuckles, "She was upset when she left apparently but Joyce just wants you to keep an eye out for her, she doesn't think she's in any trouble. She's just worried, she said you would understand." Flo says curtly.

"Yeah. Got it." he says out of the side of his mouth. What happened

this time? He considers going to check on Joyce. But she said don't freak out, which meant she wasn't freaking out. And he'd prefer to drive around looking for you on a night like this.

"And you're not freaking out?" she asks sarcastically.

"No. Not freaking out." he says assuringly but with a reluctance to the news.

"That's all. Have a good night Hop."

"Night Flo." he says, putting the radio back into the console. He turns your music back up. "Alright, Annie. Where did you run off to?" he says aloud to himself, his hands drumming on the steering wheel. Once again, turning to the songs for answers.

The air around you is still heavy with humidity but cooling as the moon chases the sun across the sky. You hear the sound of your feet in the water, the plinks of the droplets as they drip off of your warm skin. You hear the crickets and frogs surrounding the water, the creak of the wooden dock under your weight. The place felt frozen in time since the last time you were here. That last summer he'd spent in Hawkins before leaving. This was where you went when you needed to be completely alone. You smirk at your reflection, feeling so many of the same feelings you'd been dealing with back then too. Most of them stemming from Jim. On this night in particular. The date had passed without your recognition the year before, but not this year. After you said you loved him, you really hadn't thought you'd spend this date without him again. All those romantic notions you'd wanted of music and mood lighting that you thought would come of your confession never came to fruition. You knew it wasn't realistic to expect, but something felt different when you thought about Jim. You sigh and bring your feet out of the water, you reach over to turn on your radio, laying on your back and waiting for the stars to appear in the sky.

Brown Eyed Girl comes over the radio. Jim is wracking his brain, trying to think of the spots you used to run off to.

'Hey, where did we go? The days when the rains came...Down in the hollow...'. He recalls a night in the late summer he hadn't thought

about in decades.

"Shit." he says aloud. His mind failing him. He tries to remember the late night/early morning you spent walking in the woods. He was trying to remember the name or a landmark, anything. But he could only remember you. He sighs heavily and starts with the first farm he thinks of, a fire lit within him to find you tonight.

You're working on a bottle of wine. Swaying in the full moon's light on the dock, The Rolling Stones currently coming through your speakers. Despite your melancholy reason for coming out here initially, you were feeling pretty good, about everything for the first time in a long time. You sigh and take in the smattering of lightning bugs floating around the water, drawn to it just like you were tonight. You don't know a time before in your life that you felt like you had everything you needed. It wasn't all exactly how you wanted it, imagined it, sure. But you still had it nonetheless. The wine convinces you to let go of your preconceived notions about what to expect from life and just go with it. Not just in regard to Jim, although that was at the forefront of your mind.

He hears music besides his own and he shuts off the vehicle entirely. He sits and listens. It's not very loud, but he does hear something. Although it's hard to over the night songs of the cricket and frogs, creating a blanket of white noise. He slowly drives the car on the crackling gravel of the road. He follows the sound. His heart picks up the pace as he is first overcome with relief, then a new different wave of nervousness.

The smokey beat of Time is on my Side, the heat and the wine convince you to finally take off your clothes and take a dip in the water like you'd planned. You cork up your bottle and let the music move you. You default to your typical side to side hips and your hands resting on your head, your feet spinning you to the rising and falling beat.

"You'll come running back!" you sing your favorite part of the song, the chants of "You'll come running back!" you declare with your

hands in the air, your hair spinning around you. The intoxicating nature of a hot summer night when you're full of old memories and wine, making you feel some sort of way.

"You'll come running back! To Meeeeeeeeeeee" your back and forth running on the dock to the words ends when you jump on the last word, launching yourself off the dock and you fall back with a twist into the water.

The sound of the radio still playing, muffled by the sound of the water around you is a calming sound you missed. You slowly rise out of the surface of the water by the dock, wiping the water from your face, taking your time, feeling the warmth of the sun left in water. Your hands are reaching out to the dock and you see something fly over your head. Something large. It crashes into the water behind you and you yelp, pulling yourself onto the dock and pushing yourself back from the edge with your feet.

You see him erupt from the water, gasping for air. As he pushes his hair back to get the water out of his face he looks to the dock and sees you and freezes for a moment. You look at each other with concern and confusion for different reasons, both of your breathing in big heavy breaths.

"Hopper?!" you ask, your voice raspy with shock, your face full of surprise and relief. You crawl towards the edge of the dock, sitting on your knees. "What the fuck are you doing here?" your eyes are wide but your open mouth holds a surprised smile for the sight of him.

"Well I feel real fuckin' stupid now." he shouts, swimming back towards you, sulking. Your laughter builds, a half smile crosses his face. You've covered your mouth and continue to find this very entertaining. "I didn't see you come back up." he says low, his brow furrowed but there was no anger in his voice. He's still in his undershirt and pants, you pout at him in sympathy.

"Oh, Jim." you sigh out, your hand making it's way to the side of your face, teasing him in your tone. "You just can't stop trying to save me, can you? Joyce send you after me again?" you say, your eyebrow rising.

"Not exactly no." he mumbles, running his hand through his hair."She told me you left but not to worry about it."

"And you worried anyway?" you say in a sweetly condescending manner.

"It's like you know me." he says sarcastically, his brow low, eyes shifting.

"I know you're a big, over-reactive fool with a hero complex." your lips stretched into the big smile. "That likes to spy on women apparently." You tease him with your tone. He narrows his eyes, smirking at you. You move to the end of the dock again, your legs hanging in the water as you wait for him to approach it.

"And you're an over-reactive wild card with a martyr complex." he shoots back, challenging you. "So someone's gotta watch you." he adds exasperatedly. You scoff and splash water on him in waves with your hands leaning into the water below. He moves closer, giving you a look of warning. "Ann." his face is mischievous, your favorite expression of his.

"What're you gonna do, you big wet dog?" you taunt him, kicking your legs at him.

The smugness on your face and your kicking legs remind him of the night you don't remember last year. He'd stopped himself last time. He didn't plan on doing that this time. He recognizes the song playing on your radio. It's one from the tape you'd made. He sees his chance.

The song has changed. You blush when you hear it, not expecting any company, you'd used the tape you'd made with Jim in mind since you seemed to have lost your old one. Anna comes on and you try not visibly react. Hoping it's gotten too dark for him to see your face flush.

His hands find your feet, both running up your legs to your knees, you give a cautiously flirty smile. He heads right between your legs, you lean forward to meet his face as he swims closer. His hands move up the rest of the way to your hips as he nudges you to slide in with him, you don't resist. You slink into the water and he quickly reaches

for you. As his hand moves to the side of your face, he bites his lip and smiles, realizing at this moment that you'd also mumbled the lyrics to him that same drunken night you asked him to stay with Rolling Stones lyrics. His first reaction is to tease you about it, but once he feels your hands on him he's pulled back into the moment. Your fingers are playing with the collar of his undershirt. The moon is lighting up your eyes and he forgets everything else for a moment. He takes in the sight of you, hair still dripping wet, looking up at him, your eyes saying what your mouth hadn't yet about how you feel about him.

The slow beat drifts across the pond like a fog. It was as if the air around you stilled. The white noise of the frogs and insects makes you feel like you're in an impenetrable bubble with him. You see nature changing the mood lighting for you as a cloud drifted across the moon. You felt the electricity between the spaces where your skin touched. The cold air hitting your bare shoulders made you shiver, your skin prickling. His body was warmer than the water as you feel his hands touch you.

The lyrics that gave you the chills hit your ears, you feel his arm pull you closer and you let out a slow exhale in anticipation. Your eyes meet after you've both been staring at each other's mouths. Your eyelashes bat up at him involuntarily. You felt weak in his arms but you didn't question it. Your hands reach the base of his neck, you pull yourself up closer to his level. You touch and breathe in each other until the lyrics come around again, tension, electricity building. Your lips tremble and you think you see his trembling too but before you can make a final judgment on that, he seizes his opportunity.

He closes the gap the rest of the way between you. You both exhale noisily on impact. Within one breath you both pull yourself tighter to the other. The weightlessness made you feel as if you'd died in his arms and you just hadn't noticed yet. You pull back for air as the song fades. You're both almost gasping, you gulp to recover. In the silence between songs you whisper, "That was a lot better than the first one." you can't help but smile and give him another peck, your fingers on his jaw. He lets out an amused huff and kisses you on the cheek.

"It just gets better from here." he whispers in your ear. You let out a

low laugh at gives away the effect his words have on you. You put your hands on his shoulders.

"We gotta get you outta these clothes first." you say flirtatiously.

"Anything else obvious you wanna say?" he pulls away from your ear and lets out a laugh. You shake your head at him, a big smile still on your face.

"You're all wet. " you say, picking at his shirt. He interrupts before you can explain further.

"You're all wet." he says suggestively and that earns him a big laugh from you.

"Irrelevant!" you say as you push away from him, and pull yourself up on the dock. You stand over him, your hands on your hips. He's not bothered with looking away from your body as the water runs off it. The moonlight reflecting off and making you shine and glow. "We have to dry your clothes, Hop." He groans in response, pulling himself up on the dock. "I'm not gonna fuck you in a pond, man. Come on." you shake your head with a laugh and turn to walk away. You can see his boots and gun and shirt as you pad your way to the end of the dock. You assume his Blazer is just out of sight and as your feet hit grass again you see you're right.

He holds himself up, straight-armed at the end of the dock. He'd pull himself up farther but you turn and walk away and he can't move from the sight. Even though your bra and panties weren't that far off from a swimsuit, the way the material stuck to your every curve, the lace moving with you as your muscles worked under your soft skin. It forced a guttural noise out of him.

"We don't know what's in there anyway. When's the last time that pond was tested, ya think?" you let out a quiet snort laugh, ringing out your hair and shaking it as you walk back to the end of the dock to get your things. He stands, water running off of him in droves. At least he'd taken the harder stuff to dry off first.

You sit on the tailgate of his Blazer together. Both of your clothes thrown over the open doors and windows drying in the night air. A

lantern hangs on the corner of the vehicle, giving you the only light besides the glow of his dashboard, the music becoming a soundtrack to your conversations. You sit next to each other, towels around your otherwise naked bodies. He'd said he wouldn't get out of his clothes unless you did too, this was the compromise.

"Reminds me of old times." he says, cigarette bouncing on his lip.

"Yeah?" your voice higher pitched with interest, surprised he'd remembered this place.

"We were stuck in that little shed for hours." he chuckles, motioning to the now collapsed shed off of the pond.

"I didn't think you'd remember this place. Or all the dumb shit I did. But of course you did." you glance down, kicking your feet out off the edge of the bed of the Blazer. You give a nostalgia-filled sigh as you look up at the moon.

"I remember enough." his tone almost sarcastic, exhaling and holding his cigarette in his hand, resting on his knee.

"Looks like the cops showed up about 20 years too late." your shoulders shake with a quiet but expressive laugh.

"Lucky for you I'm off duty." he smirks. "I don't think I'd charge you with underage drinking at this point though." he lets out a snicker.

"You could already legally drink back then so what's that say about your age?" you sassily retort, turning your head, your chin resting on your shoulder as you looked over at him. He lets out a low huff at your response. "Smart ass." you saw low, kicking his leg with yours.

"I don't recall you being this mean to me back then." he teases you for your crush on him. You indulge him with a bashful smile. He stands up and tosses his cigarette. As you're taking in the sight of him, knowing there was as little as there ever had been separating the two of you, literally and figuratively, you can't help but sigh heavily before meeting his eyes. The blue iris' speckled with yellow as the warm light of the lantern lights his face as he moves in close to you, his hands rubbing the outsides of your legs.

"That's because I was naive enough to like you back then." you say looking down with a smile. The expression fades to one that reminds him of one he'd seen from you when you were both much younger. As a new song floats through the air, it ruins your attempts to hide your true feelings. Forcing the much more serious mood upon the two of you with, 'Jim'. You feel his eyes burning into you. His body reacting with a tension to the sound of his name from the speakers.

"And you don't like me now?" he whispers, leaning in close to you. You move your hands from the cool metal of the bed of the Blazer to his warm skin instinctually as he lessens the space between you.

You turn to him with the real answer in your eyes. "No." you lie, playing coy. He purses his lips at you in amusement, his eyes twinkling. You can feel it when he touches your shoulder. It hits you again as he moves closer, that lightning that makes your chest tight as you feel the rough pads of his fingers run their way up and into your hair. His hips hit the edge of the tailgate and you feel dizzy and small. You feel high off of him actually. Your heart does that stupid thing you hate again. It stutters as he looks at you, this song playing, him hearing the lyrics. You think about feeling embarrassed but what's the point? If you can feel this radiating off of him, you knew he had to feel it from you too.

"No?" he asks softly, his nose touching yours for a few seconds. He moves his mouth to your ear, pressing one soft kiss to the shell of it. Your eyes close and your shoulders relax. There's that weakness you used to hate the feeling of. "I think you do." he says low, pulling away after another short kiss on your neck. You shamelessly shiver and your eyes meet again.

"You do?" the teasing of his impatience in your voice. He kisses your lips the same way he just kissed your ear and neck. The way your chest rises and the way your pupils are blown give you away.

"I know you do." he says with that smug sexiness you'd gotten a hint of from time to time when you'd managed to be alone. His eyes were dark now, so close that the source of light just lit half your faces.

"Is that right?" you bite your lip at him again, wanting to hang on to these last few tension-filled moments before you give in completely.

"Yeah," he says confidently, low, an edge of impatience with you in his voice. Just where you liked him. "You want to know what else I think?" his voice is quiet but powerful enough to make you gulp at the sound of it. You sigh at him, a small moan escaping with it. Your half-lidded, emotive eyes shine up at him. You move your hands up his arms, your fingers tap and drag across his collarbone and shoulders, up the sides of his neck to the ends of his hair.

"Yeah." you say weakly, looking dreamily up at him. His eyes kept moving over your face, you could tell he was weighing options in his mind. He moves his cheek against yours, moving your hair away from your ear as he speaks to you.

"I think you love me." he says, your heart stops, you freeze. Your eyes are wide and your mouth is open, a tiny noise of surprise makes it's way up your throat, turning into a ghost of a word as you shakily exhale. He hums at your response, wrapping his arms around you, his face pressed into the bend of your neck. He plants kisses there, waiting for a reaction. You inhale deeply and lick your lips, attempting to respond to him. "You do, dont you?" he whispers against your neck, the tone of knowing hits your ears and makes your chest ache. He moves to your jaw, kisses your lips once softly before asking you again. Your lips tremble, you clench your teeth and want to whine against him in frustration of not only making you feel this way, but for knowing before you even admitted it fully to yourself. But, more importantly, you feel a sudden sense of relief. "I'm right aren't I?" he waits patiently this time. His lips close to yours, you can almost feel the subtle smirk move across his lips. He moves his hand to your cheek so you can't deflect and look away from his face. Smart move on his behalf.

He doesn't need to hear it at this point, but he wants to. He could feel it as you shook at his words, your eyes screamed it at him, just as terrified and surprised by it as he had been. He couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at rendering you speechless. Your songs had told him of your true romantic intentions. They made him sit and be alone with his thoughts, triggering memories of conversations, glances, touches. You'd been back over a year and a half now, meaning he had a whole new set of memories of you that he hadn't been pushing back for over 20 years to think about.

Your pouting lips part. "What if I say yes?" you ask him quietly, your eyes wide and engaged again. Your voice is weak, breathy and soft, he rubs his thumbs over your cheeks. His smile makes your shoulders shake for a moment with a strange huff of relief. He starts to open his mouth and you stop him with a quick kiss. "Yes." your voice just above a whisper, you release it into the world, never to be taken back. You hold your ground. Your shoulders squared. Your mouth is against his. Wild Horses registers to your sense of hearing and at that moment you realize there is no going back, your insides quiver with potential energy.

"I love you." he says much faster than he meant to, but he had to kiss you again. You let out a quiet moan that makes him shudder, collecting you into his arms tightly, pinning yours between the two of you. He held you so tightly you couldn't move. It felt so all-encompassing, so protective and safe as he kissed you hard, his hands squeezing into you. His kiss phased into harsh and possessive at times. You felt his need down to his very fingertips. As he held you, you embraced the weakness, the vulnerability of being wrapped in that strength. He kissed you like you'd seen men in suits kiss women in big gowns in old movies when you were young. How you'd always wanted to be kissed. Your faces moved back and forth against each other over and over, your tongues making your lips part as they wrapped together, leaving space for your moans to escape. As your arms itch to wrap around him, he senses it and pulls away painfully slow. Your lips and tongues sticking together as long as they could while the distance grew between them.

"Let me hear you say it." his voice was strained and raspy from arousal and emotion. You didn't hesitate this time. Your bones ached from how badly you wanted it. It wasn't until you heard it, felt it in his touch, tasted it on him that you knew it beyond a doubt. This felt real in a world where you were uncertain of everything.

"I love you." your voice was dark and deep with a distinct velvety, feminine softness. With your arms now freed, you move away from him quickly, moving your legs back onto the hatch and kneeling, "Fuck," you whine, biting your lip while moving, as another wave of chest pain flushed across your torso as you watch him watching you. "I do." you sound so breathy and strung out, gulping as you look

down at him, raising yourself on your knees, your hands sliding to his shoulders. "I do love you, don't I?" you half smile through your lust and relief, huffing out a laugh as you push your lips back against his.

"Yeah." he breathes softly back into you, you feel his body relax against yours as they meet again. "You do." he groans and meets your enthusiasm. You can't help the needy noises you let slip out into the calm night as you kiss each other, your skin starts to sweat again in the humid, still warm air. The kiss is undeniably hot itself, you both moan at the other, eyes rolling back time and time again, making up for lost time. You couldn't remember the last time you'd kissed someone this long. Your hearts beat against your ribs to reach each other.

You pull your face away with a breathy whine. "Get up here with me, handsome." you direct him in a whisper, already starting to move back into the Blazer.

He reaches out to switch off the lantern. The Blazer shifting with his weight as he climbs in, emitting a squeak of compression from the tires. The light of the full moon is more than enough to both illuminate and conceal in shadow. Your lips are wet as you can't stop licking them at the sight of him coming towards you.

You lean against the leather on the hard barrier of the wall of the back seat. It's cool against the exposed skin on your back as you feel yourself push against it, making room for him to move up against it with you. As his back hits the seat against you, you move on him. You seem to catch him off guard as he let's out an 'oof' sort of sound as your big thighs swing over his, straddling him and continuing the kiss you'd just broken. His hands ran over your thighs, his thumb purposely brushing over the scar on your upper thigh. Your chests and stomachs pushed together from the angle of him sitting up. His arms reach up to the exposed skin on your back and shoulders, pulling you even closer to him. You arch your back to allow this, it causes you to push into his hips with yours, causing him to release a deep groan as you bite his lip through the sound. You feel him growing against your inner thigh, the only thing separating your skin was these towels. Yours was already almost off, one hip exposed from it being too small to cover the expanse of your spread out thighs in this position. You feel the muscles of his stomach twitch as you move

your fingers down his sides, bringing one finger on each hand under the curled edge of his towel. He licks his lips as one of his hands moves to the back of your head, pushing you against his hungry mouth. You let out a seductive, low laugh and suck on his bottom lip. Your fingers meet each other under the swell of his stomach and you groan as the softness of the hair against your skin. Feeling his body moving tensely against your fingers as you uncurl the edges that are holding the towel together, you bite his lip again after you've done enough to easily move the towel off of him with a few well-timed tugs. Your hands grip his soft stomach, feeling it tremble at the attention of your moving hands. You slide them back to his sides, to his hips and squeeze the bulk of him at his lower back feeling your walls involuntarily clench at the thought of finally getting to feel all of this big man move on top and underneath you while you fucked him. Your eyes rolled at the thought.

"Jim," you moan into his mouth, trying to verbally express your need for more as his hand starts to wander up to your uncovered hip. His hand grips into you slowly as he groans.

"God, I love it when you say my name like that." he groans into you, biting at your lips. You let out a content whimper as he leans forward and starts moving his kisses away from your mouth. You let your fingers play with his hair as his head moves lazily underneath them.

"Jim," you try to start again, your voice much breathier as his lips worked over the sensitive skin on your neck. He hums in acknowledgment of his name. "You gonna take this towel off me or am I gonna to have to do it myself?" you say, taunting him into further action. He groans against the muscles in your neck as his mouth clamps down slightly, the vibrations running through your skin, making you hum in approval. You wondered if your eyelids were going to get tired from all the fluttering he was making them do, but you couldn't bring yourself to keep your eyes off of him long enough to close them. He moves back up to your mouth, his fingers, already on your back start to pull the towel away from you, with your bodies pushed together, you both feel the drag of the fabric across your already tingling skin as the separate feeling is replaced with skin to skin intimacy. As he tosses yours away, in the second one arm is off of you, you raise up on your knees for just a moment

to tug apart the towel of over him. Neither of you breaks the kiss as you settle back into his lap slowly, his outstretched hand sliding across your lower back, triggering a moan from both of you as you push against him even harder, his hand kneading its way down to your ass and hips, eventually moving to your thighs. You know you can't blame the summer heat for the sizzle you swear you feel as your bodies connect into a frenzy of hands and moans. Your enjoyment and impatience rise as you press your hips against him. He must take the hint because he breaks away from your mouth again, trekking a lot faster this time down your neck to collarbones. You hear his heavy breathing, the way noises escape his lips after every press to your skin and it makes your heart race.

"Fuck." he says breathlessly as he pulls away to see your naked body for the first time. You lean your upper body away from him, so you can get a good look at the man underneath your roaming hands. Your back still arched, thighs spread. His large hands, palms searing as they drag down your breasts, over your ribs to your sides, he rests them around the small of your waist. You're getting a high from the way he's looking at you. You don't ever remember feeling so sexy as his eyes glazed and his breathing became uneven.

You feel the pull to close the gap between you again as you realize it's not just lust behind his eyes while he looks at you. You try to imprint this moment in your mind to recall later when Joyce will inevitably ask you when you knew you loved him without a doubt. It was just lucky that it also happened to be the moment you realized, without a doubt, that he loved you.

"You are fuckin' gorgeous." he whispers, his voice so strung out it made your body chill with power. His hands move fast to your breasts as he rubs his thumbs against your nipples. You suck your bottom lip into your mouth with a small moan, your brow furrowing as your face moves to a focused expression. He must have also noticed this shift because he immediately moves his mouth to one of your nipples. You whine out at his actions as he sucks on your skin. Within no time he has you turned into a complete mess. Your breathing fast, moving his head move up and down with the rising and falling of your chest as his mouth and fingers worry away at your chest. As the ache he's created between your thighs becomes too

much you sigh out heavily and use your hand, already in his hair to grip his head and pull him away from you. His mouth releases with a wet pop, his mouth open as his eyes, wide with surprise looking up at you. You push him back by the shoulder with your other hand, and start feverishly kissing him, his hands slide back down to your hips again.

"I need you, Jim." you whimper into his mouth. His high pitched moan and the grip of his fingers let you know this is a mutual feeling. You push your hips against him again, but this time he's hard and resting on his stomach as you grind down the hot, wet center of you up against the underside of him.

"Fuck." he huffs out between noisy kisses. He breaks the kiss, his hand moving to the side of your face, his other sneakily moves to dive between the two of you, his fingers meeting the silky softness of your pussy lips as he explores you with his fingers. Your thighs tremble as you keep eye contact as his fingertips find your clit. Now it was your turn to curse. You mewl against him, shifting your hips. His thumb finds it's way to your bottom lip as your mouth parts and he keeps unraveling you slowly. "You do need me, don't you?" he whispers, barely touching his lips to yours as he speaks. "You're so wet already." he almost growls.

"Don't tease me, Jim," you whisper back, your eyes moving from half-lidded to dark. "I know you need me too." you huff out, kissing him, running your fingers tips lightly up and down his shaft causing him to shudder. "You're so hard already." you say back to him in the same tone he used on you. He shakes his head in amusement at you, running two fingers down your lips and inside you. He catches you off guard and you emit the most lustful groan.

"I'm not going to tease you, baby. Not tonight." he says almost sweetly, starting a pace with his fingers inside you, opening you up for him. You weren't worried about taking him, you didn't care if it hurt, as long as it was him. Your hands rest on his shoulders as he fucks you with his fingers, you've risen slightly on your knees as he keeps pressing in harder and harder. You lose your cool demeanor as the tension builds inside you. He reduces you to a writhing mess as he curls his fingers to search for what makes you fall apart. Your vision tunnels slightly as his long fingers find what they're looking for

and you let out a cry that makes you seize and jump slightly. He lets out a dark laugh, catching you off guard. "Fuck, Ann." he growls at you, you let out a confused whine, your tits bouncing against him as you lean forward to insist he explain further. He takes his fingers from your body and you let out a whimper. His hands grab your face. "I want you so fucking bad." he almost shouts, catching you off guard as he kisses you hard. "I'm gonna need to hear those sexy noises even louder when I fuck you. You do that for me, baby?" he groans and gives your ass a sudden slap of enthusiasm.

You nod slowly and moan into his mouth. "I don't think I'm going to have a choice." You drag his bottom lip between your teeth. His fingers hurt they grab your hips so tightly. "I bet you're gonna make me scream, Jim." you moan into his mouth, stroking his ego.

He lets out in a long breath. "Mmmm, that mouth, Annie. Gonna get you in trouble." he says between harsh kisses, his hand fisted into your hair.

"You know I love getting into trouble. Especially with my mouth." you bite back, he captures you in another harsh kiss. You feel his body start to lean you to the side, you take the hint and you move quickly to lay down on the bed of the Blazer, you turn together, and before you've even moved your hair away from your face he's on you again. His fingers are back on your clit making you gasp and your eyes roll back all over again. His mouth attaches to your nipple again, although you appreciated the extra touches, you knew they weren't needed as you could feel the air hitting between your legs, letting you know you were practically dripping already. The fact that he can make you melt like this makes you moan, your lips snarling with need as they part to compensate your rapidly increasing breathing speed. You throw your head back and groan loudly.

"You ready for me, baby?" he whispers against the side of your face as he settles between your legs. You take a deep breath and nod against him, pushing your face against his.

"Yeah." your voice comes out weakly. Your raspy and breathy tone make him bite his lip to contain a moan.

He holds himself up on one arm. The other hand you watch as he

drags the head of his pulsing cock against your clit. "Look at me." he rasps out, lining himself up with your entrance. You flutter your eyes and do as he asks, he meets your lips with his and he lowers down to his elbows, his chest and stomach press against yours, the sweat from your bodies making everything run slick, the only friction your feel between you is the scratch of his body hair against your soft skin. "I want those pretty eyes on me while I fuck you." his voice comes out almost desperately.

You nod in response. You breathe heavily through parted, pouting lips as one of his hands finds your face, you feel his hips shift, you're vibrating with anticipation. His attentiveness and intimacy have your skin on fire. You're aching, your body feels like it jolts with every heartbeat as he gazes into your eyes. You feel him start to push through the slick lips between your thighs. Your mouth fidgets, your fingers drag across his back and shoulders lightly as you try to mentally prepare yourself. You'd gotten so caught up in getting him inside you that you hadn't stopped to consider the act itself. You wish you had as you're surrounded by his presence, his body, his words. It was a lot more overwhelming than you thought it would be. This was something you hadn't felt in so long.

You feel his breath hitch as his head notches into you, he returns to kissing you, his fingers in your hair as you take him in slowly. He exhales and curses as your hips meet. Your eyes are fluttering behind their lids as his mouth kept moving against yours despite the difficulty it caused with your moans and gasps.

"You are so wet you took every bit of me." he rasps out, trying to catch his breath as you tense around him. "You feel so good, baby." his voice is a higher pitch as he disconnects the kiss and goes for your neck, his lips and tongue move lazily over your skin. You let your fingers nest in the hair at the back of his head and he moved it over your neck and shoulders, allowing your mouth to gasp and chest to heave at the space he took up inside you. Your free hand roaming over his shoulders and back as he groans and starts to move. Before he pushes back in a second time he looks back up at you, his hair a mess from your hands, his eyes dark from blown out pupils, he lets out a weak sounding huff before making sure you're okay with a searching stare into your eyes. You nod and lock your legs around

him, your fingertips reaching up to his beard, you beckon him closer with a nod of your chin.

Although it wasn't needed, you'd always wanted the chance to say it to him, so you do. "Fuck me, Jim." you whimper out quietly.

He pushes in again as he starts to kiss you, triggering a low moan from your body. Your hands already back in his hair as he lets out a strung out grunt. He responds to every moan you release from the feel of him with his own. The synchronicity of your breathing and movements is intoxicating. You push to meet his hips, your breathe in and out of each other's mouths as you cry out at the same time. The way his eyes didn't show any fear of the intimate connections he was making with you made you dizzy. The solid pound of his weight against your body put the perfect punctuation onto every collision your bodies had together. The weight of him on you, the way your body responded to every move he made, how if he moved, so did you, you both rocked the entire vehicle but were too caught up in each other to notice.

As his thrusts grow faster, your sounds grow higher in pitch. Building up the pressure between the two of you. He reaches down to hold your hip to keep you close to him, you shift your hips in response and he slides into you in the most satisfying way. You let out a loud moan at the sensation of his curving just right into you. He feels the change in your mannerisms and quickly repeats this action. Groaning as he feels you tense, his mouth finds it's way to your ear, as he drowns out everything but the sound of his breathing.

"Oh, fuck." you groan out loudly, exasperated at how fast your blood was rushing through your veins. You let out a much more helpless sounding yelp as he pumps into you.

"Right there, baby?" he purrs in your ear, earning a grin from you he can't see.

"Right there." you moan loudly back, your back arches. His words made you ache for him. "Don't stop." you gasp out.

"I'm not stopping until I feel you come around me." he continues giving you exactly what you asked for.

"So close." you whine out in praise. He moves from your neck to right above you. You open your eyes once you feel his nose brush up against yours.

"Me too baby. Me too. " he whispers, grunting as he moves against you, his words are weak and drawn out.

You bring one hand up near the hollow of his throat, gasping for him. "So good, Jim. Fuck." you practically shout the last word, you manage to rush out the rest as he moved you steadily underneath him.

"You feel so fuckin' good baby, you gonna come for me?" you can't help but respond with a whimper to his words, nodding with an open panting mouth. You feel yourself tightening at his words. "C'mon baby. Give it to me." he groans in waves as he consistently pounds into you, wet skin hitting with a slap.

You feel it building and those last few breaths before it takes you over start. "Shit," you say through gritted teeth, on the precipice of being overwhelmed, your word almost a snarl as you breathe out his name quietly. He curves into you again, you moan out his name even louder. You try to tell him you're going to come but the words don't make it past the rapidly growing moans. He growls and hits into you hard. He attacks your neck with harsh kisses as you throw your chin up, head back and your breaths now nothing but high pitched quick moans that resembled the word yes over and over.

"Yes, fuck, come for me." he begs in a deep, strung out voice as you're already fluttering around him. Your mouth is wide open, as are your eyes as they blur and you let out a very long and ranged single cry as you pulse so hard around him. The orgasm hurts, your body aching around his size as your muscles milk his orgasm out of him.

You feel his ragged, heavy breath on your skin as he lets go, groaning a combination of "Fuck," and "Baby." over and over in a raspy voice.

Your splayed hand in on the back of his head, holding him as you feel him come. Your brain trying to fade you back into reality deliciously slowly as the sensation of his still lazily pumping into you makes you groan just slightly in pleasure as you put your mouth to his skin on his shoulders, as he'd gone mostly limp on top of you. Your chests are

still laboring away, your fingers have being removed from their implantation in his back start to lazily trail up and down his skin. You're hit with that addicting wave of oxytocin as you both recover from the fire you'd started. He eventually takes a shoulder rolling breath, planting a kiss on your shoulder, you smile automatically, your eyes closing. He follows it with another single kiss on your neck, your eyes open as he moves to plant a kiss on your lips, drawing back slowly. He couldn't have asked for a more reassuring look on your face. Your swollen lips are open and distracting even now. Your half-lidded eyes, barely focused, but on his face nonetheless making him move his hand to touch your cheek.

You reach up to rest your fingertips on his jaw in response, sighing heavily as your breathing calms. "Finally." you say in an animated exhale, your lashes batting. His shoulders shake above you as he buries his chuckling face in your neck, nuzzling you.

"Finally." he agrees, the words muffled through kisses being planted across your skin. You hum contently as his lips work against your throat.

"Since I had to go fall in love with you without knowing how good you are in bed, I have to admit I could not be more relieved," you say with a grin, earning a full laugh from him this time. He plants a firm kiss on your lips as he pulls out of you.

Resting on his side, facing you, still on your back, on leg bent at the knee. "Come here you ridiculous, woman." he says in a low warm tone, you shimmy over to him, matching your chest up to his, his arm runs certainly down your back to your ass as you both find your lips to be nearly magnetic in nature now. "I knew it couldn't be bad with you." he says in a sultry way that makes goosebumps break out over your skin.

"Sure, take the romantic answer." you tease, sucking on his bottom lip as he grins. You run your arms up and around his neck, your leg hitching over his hip. "Of course it couldn't be bad, Jim." you shake your head and kiss him gently. "Not with how it's felt everytime your skin has touched mine since that night." you lean in to start a slow, lazy kiss.

"Romantic answer." he says proudly, his arms wrapping tightly around you.

"I have the ability," you say with faux offense. "I just hadn't had anyone worth using the ability on in so long before you. You should be able to forgive a woman for falling short on words when looking at your handsome face, Jim." you bite your lip at him, bumping his nose with yours. He shakes his head at you, kissing your nose before pulling you into his chest, his lips pecking where they landed as you're enclosed by his arms again. His face rests partially on top of yours, you hear and feel his breath moving across your skin. You find it soothing and lulling.

"I love you." he simply states. His voice smooth and quiet, full of emotion as he plants another kiss into your hair.

"I love you too." you respond in the same low, love-drunk tone, planting a kiss on his chest the punctuate the statement. You smile with your nose pressed into his chest as it rises and falls slowly, his fingertips starting to draw circles on your back, you snuggle into him, your arm moved to his side where you return to the means of physical affection to show him how you feel.

The pull of El broke your evening short, but you knew there'd be more evenings now. You still had full nights and days spent together to explore. The idea felt so odd, as it felt like you'd love him for so long, but in reality, you had skipped the formalities of dating completely and had yet to do the most mundane things together as a couple. You don't even remember walking up the stairs as you lie in bed and shout into your pillow about what had happened. You knew he'd done his job thoroughly as you find yourself quickly falling asleep in the comfort of your bed despite the excitement your heart and brain were feeling. Now your dreams were your reality, and for the first time in your life, you felt that the future was going to be good. That everything would work itself out. Because so far all the fuck ups, trails and tribulations had guided you to exactly where you wanted to be.

MIX TAPE TRACK LISTS
The Rolling Stones - Time Is On My Side

Jimmy Clanton - Go Jimmy Go
Jim Croce-Don't Mess With Jim
The Supremes - Come See About Me, Where Did Our Love Go
James Brown - Try Me
The Beach Boys -God Only Knows
Betty Everett - Shoop Shoop (In His Kiss)
Little Richard - Miss Ann
Aretha Franklin - Jim
Little Anthony and the Imperials - Goin' Out Of My Head
The Contours - Do You Love Me
Percy Sledge - When A Man Loves A Woman
Soft Cell - Where Did Our Love Go
Van Morrison - Brown Eyed Girl
Bad Company - Anna
Player - baby Come Back
Aretha Franklin - Natural Woman
Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrel - Ain't No Mountain High
Peter Frampton - Baby I Love Your Way
The Doobie Brothers - What A Fool Believes
Foreigner - Feel Like The First Time
The Police - Every Little Thing She Does
The Eagles-One of These Nights
The Eagles -Desperado
The Four Tops - I can't help myself
Dr. Hook - A little bit more
Alvin Bishop - fooled around and fell in love
looking glass-brandy
otis redding- i've been loving you too long
percy sledge/smokey robsinson - you really got a hold on me.